Decolonial Theology as an Ongoing Process: The Importance of a Common Narrative

Debora Tonelli

Abstract – Decolonial theology is an ongoing process, requiring the readiness of all actors involved (both former colonized and colonizers). The greatest risks come from the prevalent feeling of revenge and from a too strong influence of politics and theological thinking. For this reason, a high-quality level of dialogue is a good way to avoid radicalism and extremism, but also to build a new and common perspective. This paper argues the importance of building a common narrative as an essential part of the decolonial process in its political and epistemic aspects. My purpose is to analyze the role of decolonial theology as a possible strategy for change and as an «open question». In particular, I will focus on the role of the plurality of narratives as a privileged tool of decolonial theology, in two respects: 1) its contribution to the building of a new narrative and 2) the decentralization of both «center» and «periphery», in order to encourage their mobility, namely the possibility that a «periphery» becomes a «center» and vice versa.

Introduction

This paper is part of a wider research into the dynamics between religion and violence, here focused on the critical role of the decolonial theology in the context of the Christian tradition on both theological and political levels. This paper argues the importance of the building of a common narrative as essential part of the decolonial process in its political and epistemic aspects. Here I am not interested in the analysis of a specific country and for this reason the references to specific countries and situations will be examples[1]. Instead, my purpose is to analyze the role of decolonial theology as possible 'strategy' for changing and as an 'open question'. In particular, I will focus on the role of the

---

[1]   In this issue other authors analyze specific countries: Israel (Rabbi Meyer), Sri Lanka (Kodithuwakku), and Tunisia (Mokrani).

plurality of narratives as a privileged tool of decolonial theology: on the one hand to explore its contribution to the building of a new and common narrative. On other hand, to decentralize both 'center' and 'peripheries', in order to encourage their 'mobility', that is, the possibility that a 'periphery' becomes a 'center' and vice versa. I will argue that the decolonization is a process which imply the transformation of both former colonizers and colonized.

The premise is that religion – as a system of practices and beliefs – contributes to the building of the value system, of criteria of judgement, of religious and social imaginaries for both believers and non-believers. During colonialism, religion – whether consciously or not – has often supported the colonizers[2]. At the end of official colonialism, religion has often been the space in which colonized people have fought to build their new identity. In this context, biblical interpretation has sometimes played a role in the struggle for independence[3]. From this perspective, the building of a common narrative of the past can play an important role in the new socio-political asset and contribute to take the edge off between former colonizers and former colonized. With this aim Massimo Zancanaro and his research group built and experimented the Negotiation Table, that is, a collaborative system to support the reconciliation of narrative concerning the Palestinian-Arabs and Israel-Jews conflict[4]. In presenting their experiment as an 'ideal space' my purpose is to highlight the importance of building a common narrative in the conflict resolution, in this case by means of a technology-enabled process. In the context of this paper, the Negotiation Table will offer us material for reflection on the dialogical approach aiming to the building of a common narrative. The Negotiation Table is a sort of ideal context in which to find characteristics and methodology useful to support the decolonial

---

[2] An example of this is the bull *Sublimis Deus* (1536) promulgated by Pope Paul III: it recognized the Indios as rational human beings, but the theologians of Salamanca (1539) highlighted the civilizing role of the Europeans towards to the people across the ocean, because they were incapable of governing themselves. Under the pretext of making them fit for civil society, the destruction of their culture was legitimated. For Asian postcolonial theology, see R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations. An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology*, Danvers MA, Chalice Press, 2003. The Bible was sometimes used to justify the presence of both missionaries and colonialists and to pacify the colonized.

[3] The literature is wide, here see: R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002; M.W. Dube - A.M. Mbuvi - D. Mbuwayesango (eds.), *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, Atlanta GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, pp. 1-28.

[4] See par. 2. As anticipated, I will not discuss specific contexts nor the Palestinian-Israel conflict, but only the role of a common narrative as tool for conflict resolution.

process. Of course, as we will see, some important differences distinguish the ideal space of this experiment from that of specific countries.

To follow, the plurality of narrative will highlight the divergences not as a limit but a resource. The comparison between conventional narrative and asian and african narratives will provide the opportunity to analyze the importance of cultural inclusion encouraged by dialogical approach promoted by the Second Vatican Council[5]. Welcoming the dialogical approach, decolonial theology requires the readiness of both former colonized and colonizers to dialogue at a high quality level. The issue at stake is not only the reconciliation with the past but the building of new identities and a new global order, and this can only be an 'ongoing process'.

1. The influence of Theology in the Political Order

Whenever we face theological and religious challenges, whether directly or not, this confrontation will influence the socio-political order. This is especially true in times of transitions and crisis, in which the 'horizons of meaning' are reconfigured, making it clearly difficult to separate religion and politics; rather there are some grey areas. In these respects, decolonial theology opens a space of thought, providing the opportunity to re-think the power relations[6]. These have both religious and political implications:

«whereas decolonization refers mainly to specific moments of political struggles to send the invaders back home, decoloniality opens up the domain of the epistemic

---

[5]   Of course, Second Vatican Council was very complex and theologians are still discussing on its legacy. A discussion on the Second Vatican Council will be not provided in this article. I rather focus on its invitation to dialogical approach.

[6]   See C. Mendoza-Álvarez - T.-M. Courau (eds.), *Decolonial Theology: Violence, Resistance and Spirituality*, in «Concilium*: International Journal for Theology», 2020, 1 (Monographic Issue). Some authors argue radical ideas: «The decolonial option means, in the first place, to engage in *epistemic disobedience* … Epistemic disobedience is necessary to take on *civil disobedience* (Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr.) to its point of no-return. Civil disobedience within modern Western epistemology (and remember: Greek and Latin, and six vernacular European modern and imperial languages) could lead only to reforms, not to transformations. For this simple reason, the task of decolonial thinking and the enactment of the decolonial option in the twenty-first century starts from epistemic de-linking: from acts of epistemic disobedience»; W. Mignolo, *Decolonizing Western Epistemology. Building Decolonial Epistemologies*, in A.D. Isasi-Díaz - E. Mendieta (eds.), *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012, pp. 19-43, here p. 36. For the debate on the provincialization of Europe, see D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2008.

and the hermeneutical, explanation and understanding, political and ethical processes delegitimating the colonial matrix of power, and building a world that is non-imperial and non-capitalist»[7].

On a socio-political level, using the expression 'decolonial theology' interrogates western paradigms and criteria of judgment, which, in the past, brought religion close to colonialism and imperialism:

«The Bible was viewed by Africans as complicit in the colonial process in at least two ways: 1) as the official religion of colonizers, it provided the grounds for an African religious genocide, and 2) it gave theological support to the military subjugation of Africans in the guise of Christianization. The collusion (intentional or not) of European missionaries and colonial administrators solidified, for the colonized, the imperializing role of the Bible as part of the colonial project»[8].

In the decades of African independence from European colonialism, African theologians worked to build the basis of African Christianity «that was both uncompromisingly African and authentically Christian»[9]. Political change goes hand in hand with new theological thinking. Then, 'decolonial theology' becomes the basis of radical epistemic change, which is open to the possibility of a radical re-thinking of religious tradition and political space[10]. In this framework, the translation of the Biblical Texts into African languages allowed an independent interpretation of the Bible within African social realities[11].

---

[7] W. Mignolo, *Decolonizing Western Epistemology*, p. 24. Scholars working on 'decolonization' and 'decoloniality' differentiate between Eurocentrism and Occidentalism within Europe, whereas in the non-European world Eurocentrism is a component of Occidentalism. Furthermore, the Western perspective on knowledge is not synonym with Eurocentrism. See E. Gutierrez-Rodriguez - M. Boatca - S. Costa, *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, London - New York, Routledge, 2010; A.D. Isasi-Díaz - E. Mendieta, *Decolonizing Epistemologies*.

[8] A.M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline*, in «Currents in Biblical Research», 15, 2017, 2, pp. 149-169, here p. 158.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

[10] For example in Amazonia, where indio theology is an attempt of critical reading of the christian theological heritage, see: L. Hernández, *La teologia india y su lugar en la Iglesia*, available at the following URL: https://cimi.org.br/pub/assteologica/Eleazar_LATEOLOGIAINDIAYSULUGARENLAIGLE-SIA.pdf. For the theological tension between the decolonial shift and an ecclesial institution linked to existing political systems, in the defense of indigenous people, see P. Suess, *Prolegomena on Decolonization and Coloniality of Theology in the Church*, in «Concilium. International Journal for Theology», 2, 2013, pp. 71-80.

[11] A.O. Mojola, *Bible Translation in Africa*, in P.A. Noss (ed.), *A History of Bible Transaltion*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007, pp. 141-162; G. Yorke, *Bible Translation in Africa: An Afrocentric Interrogation of the Task*, in M.W. Dube - A.M. Mbuvi - D. Mbuwayesango (eds.), *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, Atlanta GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, pp. 157-170.

On a theological and cultural level, 'decolonial theology' entails the overcoming of the conventional narrative of Christianity as a 'western religion': its birth in Palestine, its arrival in Rome and then its spread throughout the whole world. In this conventional narrative the idea prevails that Christian universalism is a way of self-expansion – from a center to the periphery – incorporating other cultures into a Western cultural identity. Insofar as it legitimates others' points of view and interpretations of the Christian experience, decolonial theology breaks this narrative and attempts to include a wider Christian tradition, rooted outside the West and giving life to a wider community. This new perspective calls into question the relationship between the 'center' (both institutional and symbolic) and the periphery, between the 'West' and its former colonial countries, ready to give their contribution. Finally, decolonial theology interrogates both 'Orientalism' and 'Occidentalism', defined as «the expression of a constitutive relationship between Western representations of cultural difference and worldwide Western dominance»[12].

Then, decolonized theology takes up the theological and political challenge of rethinking the relationship between the center and the periphery. This is an interdependent and dynamic process, which will involve not only people in building their independence, but also their former colonizers[13]. At this stage it is difficult to foresee where this approach will lead us, but it is a way to introduce a new narrative and to imagine new kinds of relationships in view of a more inclusive Christianity.

So far, I have used both the terms 'theology' and 'religion'. By 'theology' I mean the doctrinal tradition, the theoretical and meaningful basis of practices and beliefs. By 'religion' I mean a set of behaviors and beliefs, related to the sacred (i.e. separated from the common life), which

---

[12]   F. Coronil, *Beyond Occidentalism*: *Towards Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories*, in «Cultural Anthropology», 11, 1996, 1, pp. 51-87, here p. 57. See also E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978. In a similar way, someone theorized Africa as a European invention, see: V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa, Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 1988. Radical black thinking was able to re-use this 'invention' against racism and colonialism, see: R.D.G. Kelly, *Freedom Dreams. The Black Radical Imagination*, Boston MA, Beacon Press, 2002, pp. 13-35. Among the purposes of the Amazon Synod was the inclusion of Indios theology.

[13]   I am using the expression 'former colonizers' in reference to the end of 'official colonialism', being well aware that it did not mark the end of other – more ambiguous and destructive – forms of colonialism. See F. Corigliano, *Lo Stato del colonialismo. Sovranità e governamentalità come paradigmi dell'Europa*, in «Politics. Rivista di Studi Politici», 8, 2017, 2, pp. 35-48; G. Gozzi, *Eurafrica: Il paradigma dell'ordine europeo. L'Europa e l'eredità coloniale*, ibid., pp. 21-33; F. Pigeaud - N.S. Sylla, *L'arme invisible de la Françafrique: Une histoire du franc CFA*, Paris, La Découverte, 2018.

are able to unify all believers in a single moral community defined as a 'church'[14]. Radicalizing their differences: 'theology' is a theoretical knowing, while 'religion' produces social effects, and influences not only the community of believers, but also the public space. Its universality means that a religion has to take into account the cultural context in which practices and beliefs have their home[15]. In some way, a cultural hermeneutic of practices and beliefs is at stake, aiming to combine cultural differences around the same theological meaning. Historically speaking, this has happened continuously, and, at the outset, Christianity was born from the combination of several cultures. Despite the conventional narrative, a re-reading of the birth and of the expansion of Christianity could be useful for building an inclusive narrative, balancing facts, points of view, interpretations, and purposes. In doing so, we could rediscover historical resources to build a common narrative as basis for a decolonial theology:

«[Epistemological 'decolonial turn'] consists in becoming critically aware on Eurocentrism, from the view point of the post-colonial world, of Eurocentrism as the setting of discourse (*locus enunciationis*). This is a generalized *habitus* of the thinker, the scientist, the philosopher, which penetrates so deeply into the subjectivity of the theoretical and the objectivity of theories (and the human and social sciences), that is pratically impossible to free oneself from its limitations, which are unanimously accepted by all — That makes it practically impossible to go beyond its narrow deforming limits»[16].

In the next paragraph, in order to argue the importance of a common narrative, I will present the Negotiation Table conceived by a technological international research group, as a contribution to conflict resolution. As an 'ideal space', this experiment provides interesting suggestions and analogies with the dialogical process triggered by the Second Vatican

---

[14] This is the Durkheim's definition of religion, which aims to explain it starting from its social effects. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York, Free Press, 1995. In a paper published in the previous issue of this review, Charles Taylor argues 'religion' a polysemic word, see: C. Taylor, *Che cos'è la religione? La polisemia di un concetto contrastato*, in «Annali di studi Religiosi», 20, 2019, pp. 9-22; This paper consists in the translation of the conference held by Taylor at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM) in Vienna, on May 17, 2018, entitled *The Polysemy of «Religion»*. For a non-western perspective see also P. Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2013. Jenny Daggers reflected on the birth of new concepts of religions in modernity, see: J. Daggers, *Postcolonial Theology of Religions. Particularity and Pluralism in World Christianity*, London - New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 13-31. However, the perspective of this paper supports a more inclusive relation between 'theology' and 'religion'. Also for this reason, the emphasis is on dialogical approach.

[15] See *Lumen Gentium*, par. 23.

[16] E. Dussel, *The Epistemological Decolonization of Theology*, in «Concilium», 2, 2013, pp. 21-31, here p. 26.

Council. The additional value of this experiment is two-fold: on the one hand, it involved real people, living in the Palestinian-Israel conflict, one of the most harshest conflicts in history. Of course, the purpose of this experiment is not the solution of the Palestinian-Israel conflict, but a way to test the contribute of a common narrative in peace-building. On the other hand, as in any experiment, concrete actions were staged, achieving concrete results.

However, we should not neglect at least five characteristics that require caution: the first is that the researchers made the experiment under controlled conditions, while the dialogical process triggered by the Second Vatican Council is open and involves potentially the whole world. The second is the age of the participants: the people involved in the experiment were teenagers, while the dialogue promoted by the Church is transgenerational. The third characteristic concerns the number of participants: a small group participated in the experiment, while an indefinite number of people is taking part in the dialogue within Christianity. The fourth concerns the composition of the group: the participants in the experiment were divided into two relatively homogeneous groups, while within the Christianity there are different kinds of participants. Finally, duration: the experiment had a limited duration, while the dialogical approach within the Church is continuous. Anyway, despite these differences, we will see that this experiment provides interesting methodological elements and suggestions for building a common narrative.

2. The Building of a Common Narrative: The Ideal Context of a Technological Experiment

A few years ago, Massimo Zancanaro told me about an experiment that he conducted with his research group in order to promote the use of technology to support peace in world conflicts. The issue at stake was not the technological contribution to conflict resolution, but

«how to help reconcile the 'common' people in a situation of conflict? Or, similarly, after a conflict, what can be done to heal scars, to reconcile diverse accounts of the past, and to build a more positive attitude?»[17].

---

[17] M Zancanaro et al., *Co-narrating a Conflict: An Interactive Tabletop to Facilitate Attitudinal Shifts*, in «ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction», 19, 2012, 3, pp. 903-924, here p. 903.

The research group built a Negotiation Table, that is, a collaborative system

«explicitly designed to support reconciliation of narratives of a conflict by means of a technology-enabled process aimed at encouraging the users to reconsider hostile attitudes towards another»[18].

The authors of this experiment explain that

«the underlying assumption of this approach is the notion that participants may achieve a greater understanding of and appreciation for other participants' viewpoints under conditions in which technology supports the creation of a shared narration»[19].

In order to test their approach, they chose the conflict between Palestinian-Arabs and Israeli-Jews. In explaining the technological specific characteristics of their Negotiation Table, the authors highlight the importance of storytelling:

«In our approach, we used the storytelling approach in an experiential and participatory manner by fostering a social interaction that leads to joint problem solving».

Three characteristics of the building-process concerning the storytelling are important: 1) To provide specific interface elements that indicate specific points of disagreement rather than vague feelings of discord 2) To require joint action within a process of revising and completing the narration, in the belief that joint actions are an important component of the interventions needed in view of achieving common goals; 3) To require the achievement of a joint result (participants are awarded a small honorarium only when they complete the task together)[20]. The general framework is the human relations approach «based on the idea of creating personal relations among participants and, by so doing, changing stereotypical perceptions and attitudes»[21]. In order to realize this human relations approach, they organized intergroup encounters focused on «family stories that intertwine emotional and personal narratives of the collective history of the conflict with consideration for the subjective perspective of each side»[22]. Interviews with the participants

---

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 904.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 1906.

[21] *Ibid*.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 1918-1919. This experiment had a big impact on the use of technology in the conflict solution. In the last part of the article, the authors discuss limitations and recommendations of the Negotiation Table and, among them, the role of the moderator/translator and the linguistic issue.

immediately following the intervention revealed their strong interest in and satisfaction with the process[23].

Within the framework of a decolonial theology, this experiment is interesting for four reasons. First of all, the building of a common telling of the story, in which all the participants are on equal terms. In the colonial context, equality between colonizers and colonized is missing. This continues in the post-colonial age, as long as the former colonized is trying to re-build its identity and its independence. It often continues to be under the ambivalent protection of the former colonizers, in a subordinate position. An important sign of its being recognized as an 'equal' is the fact that it plays a role in the formation of the historical narrative. The opportunity to give a voice to those formerly colonized is a way to build a historical narrative that balances the historical dynamics and the responsibilities of the protagonists. Of course, this could have consequences on the political, social and religious levels, arising from the creation of a new perspective on their experience of the past.

Second, the aim of the common narrative is not to prevail, or to assert right and wrong, but to achieve a joint result. Resentment and revenge are not the feelings on which to build the best future. It is not possible to change the facts of the past, but it is possible to change the perspective on them. By pursuing a common goal, it is possible to trigger new dynamics between former colonized and the colonizers.

Third, the importance of focusing on disagreement, not to take a superficial attitude or a 'vague feeling of detachment'. In South Africa, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Desmond Tutu did exactly this, promoting responsibility and forgiveness[24]. Reconciliation does not mean denying the past, but facing up to it, in order not to remain trapped in it.

Fourth, in the experiment, the prerequisite for the continuing storytelling is its approval by all participants. To promote a decolonial theology, the common narrative should be the result of sharing facts, points of view, and interpretations. It means that any community has to be willing to modify its own storytelling, in a way that recognizes the legitimacy of other points of view and interpretations. These four points show the

---

The linguistic issue is also important within the colonial-postcolonial and decolonial framework, in which the colonized people know the language of the colonizers, but not vice versa.

[23]   *Ibid.*, p. 1918.

[24]   D. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Johannesburg, Rider, 2000.

interdependence between the former colonized and the colonizers; as we will see later, decolonial theology is a process that involves both actors, because it requires a radical transformation of epistemic and hermeneutical paradigms in politics, theology and economy[25].

By challenging the contraposition of former colonized and colonizers, all these elements can contribute to the building of a common narrative, making possible the building of new identities. This would be in keeping with the indications of the Second Vatican Council. In promoting dialogue, the Council[26] represented a great change in theological thinking and it triggered a process of intra-ecclesial change, that is, to a dialogical approach:

«Vatican II was not a council where such definitive and fixed agreement could be achieved, given the differences of opinion represented there. Indeed, the Council Fathers quite wisely avoided definitive pronouncements on a wide range of issues where they realized that dialogue was to be preferred, quite literally, to pontification»[27].

Notwithstanding the divergences, there was convergence in the recognition of the importance of dialogue as a common method to proceed along a shared path. This convergence and the resultant consensus were rooted in ecclesiastical institutions and brought together by centripetal forces[28]. Not by accident:

«For Asian Christians Vatican II remains a point of departure of a journey, a journey which they themselves should make. More than individual texts, it is the overall spirit and orientation of the council which matters for the Asian Churches to build their future in conversation with their contexts»[29].

The complexity of the situation prevents any generalization, but it's possible to find analogies among former colonized countries of different continents[30].

---

[25]   For the interaction between theology, politics and economy see B. de Sousa Santos, *A gramática do tempo. Para uma nova cultura política*, São Paolo SP, Cortez, 2008, Part II; B. de Sousa Santos*, Renovar a teoria crítica e reinventar a emancipaçao social*, São Paulo SP, Boitempo, 2007, pp. 29-31.

[26]   See *Ecclesiam Suam*, parr. 70; 75-76.

[27]   G. Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity. Questions for the Church in Our Time*, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 2007, p. 110.

[28]   *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

[29]   F. Wilfred, *Christianities and Asian Theologies Through the Lens of Postcolonialism*, in «Concilium: The International Journal for Theology», 2018, 1, pp. 15-26.

[30]   For example: the perception of Christianity as a colonial religion, some difficulties in the relation between religion and local culture, the need to renew the dialogue between the center and the periphery. The literature on these topics is wide. Here I will just mention P.C. Phan, *Reception*

The prerequisite for dialogue is the existence of multiple voices and experiences, each recognized as equally significant, in spite of the difference in roles, for all the difference between 'center' and 'periphery'. Of course, the issue at stake is not the historical narrative in itself, but its role in the legitimation of various theological positions and the acceptance of new paradigms of rationality, with their social and political consequences:

«Decolonizing epistemology means to decolonize naturalized principles on which knowledge is built, in disciplinary formations as well as in ideological discourses in the public sphere»[31].

Furthermore, it means to overcome the prejudice of an idealized distinction between Western cultures and non-Western cultures, which marked the efforts to interpret contemporary cultural dynamics, but neglected the fact that Europe's cultural transformation was triggered by its colonial past[32]. Decolonization is a very complex process, involving both Western and non-Western cultures, and requiring the decentralization of each. The existence of a variety of narratives can contribute both to decentralization and to the decolonization of cultures, in turn triggering a new and dynamic relation between the center and the periphery. From this perspective, in the next paragraph I will discuss the existence of a plurality of narrative not as a limit but as a resource.

3. Plurality of Narratives as Resource

The conventional narrative speaks of a Christianity that has gradually spread from the West to the rest of the world:

«The conventional narrative of Christianity as a Western religion, that is, one that originated in Palestine but soon moved westward, with Rome as its final destination, and from Rome as its epicenter, spread worldwide, belies the fact that in the first four

---

of and Trajectories for Vatican II in Asia, in «Theological Studies», 74, 2013, pp. 302-320. For the relation between Christian missions and colonialism in Africa see: M.W. Dube Shomanah - G.O. West (eds.), The Bible in Africa: Transaction, Trajectories and Trends, Leiden, Brill, 2000.

[31] W. Mignolo, Decolonizing Western Epistemology, p. 22.

[32] «In the wake of Edward Said's (1978) seminal contribution, Postcolonial Studies have largely taken upon themselves the task of exposing the extent to which such representations of culture(s) as sealed entities foster Orientalist representations of the Other. The project of decolonizing European sociology however requires that we complement the necessary critique of Orientalism with a clear conceptualization and separate treatment of Occidentalism» quoted in E. Gutierrez-Rodriguez - M. Boatca - S. Costa, Decolonizing European Sociology, p. 2.

centuries of Christianity, the most active and successful centers of mission were not Europe but Asia and Africa, with Syria as the center of gravity. But even Asian Christians outside West Asia can rightly boast an ancient and glorious heritage, one that is likely as old as the apostolic age»[33].

From this point of view, the universality of Christianity told by conventional narrative is a form of expansion from a 'center' (both political and religious) to a 'periphery'. On one hand, we have to take into account that the conventional narrative is rooted in the Acts of Apostles and in the Pauline-Petrine churches. On the other hand, we have to admit that in the last centuries, the development of the conventional narrative pushed into the background aspects of the intrinsic pluralism of the origins of Christianity. And last but not least, the conventional narrative contributed to identify Christianity with colonialism:

«One of the bitter ironies of Asian Christianity is that, though born in Asia, it returned to its birthplace, and is still being regarded by many Asians as a Western religion imported to Asia by Portuguese and Spanish colonialists in the 16th century, and later by other European countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, and lastly by the United States»[34].

The consequence was the identification of the western version of the faith as a sort of standard of Christianity, as it were, not placed in time and space. In addition to that, for many centuries, not only Christian missionaries but also the political and military hegemony of Europe contribute to the spread of Christianity[35]. Religion and politics have been

---

[33] P. Phan, *Reception of and Trajectories for Vatican II in Asia*, p. 306.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 306-307. Other authors criticize the eurocentric historiography of Christianity: «However this Asian trajectory is little understood, because the dominant historiography of Christianity has always been Eurocentric.The majority of historical texts used in seminaries divided the subject into three historical periods: ancient (Jewish-Greek), medieval (European) and modern (colonial expansion). The last of these corresponds to the 'new age of world mission', in which Latin America and Asia make their appearance in the Christian narrative». D. Franklin Pilario et al. (eds.), *Asian Christianities*, in «Concilium», 54, 2018, 1, pp. 7-11, here p. 7. See also E. Dussel, *The Epistemological Decolonization of Theology*, *ibid.*, 2, 2013, pp. 1-31. Dussel highlights that during the Middle Ages, the Latin-German Europe was peripheral and isolated by the Asian-African Mediterranean system. Taking up Braudel's thesis, Dussel argues that all of a sudden, Latin-German Europe started to expand and the Modern Age was characterized by The 'death of the Mediterranean Sea' and by The 'birth of the Atlantic ocean'. For the identification of Christianity with colonialism and imperialism see also: See L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1989.

[35] «The beginning of colonization on the African continent is usually set around the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884   Colonial formal education was subsequently set up to do two things through two mechanisms: 1) missionary schools aimed to provide the African converts with the ability to read the Bible for themselves (or so they claimed) and 2) government schools sought to produce a colonial workforce only at the clerical level at best». A.M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical*

interwoven. With the official end of the colonial experience and the growth of the autonomy of countries once colonized, the Church has also rethought its missionary experience[36]. Too often, over the centuries, some missionaries have supported the colonial and imperialist enterprise, feeling empowered to 'make disciples of all nations,' and making Christianity perceived as the religion of the colonizers[37]. We cannot here retrace the history of the missions, but want to highlight that the need became gradually clear to change the approach to local cultures:

«Relying on the conviction that 'the incarnation of the Word was also a cultural incarnation', the Pope affirms that cultures, analogically comparable to the humanity of Christ in whatever good they possess, may play a positive role of mediation in the expression and extension of the Christian faith»[38].

This new approach opened a way to hearing different narratives.

The origin of Christianity is multicultural and polyphonic, to the point that it would be impossible to identify the cultural root of Christianity exclusively in any one among the following cultural traditions: Jews, Mediterranean Pagan, Asia Minor or north Africa. For this reason, there is a need for a complex narrative and dialogue between cultures, between the center and the periphery. In the Apostolic Letter, *Africa Terrarum*, Pope Paul VI recognized African cultures:

«For continually there occur the names of the great doctors and writers of the Church: that is of Origen, St Athanasius, of St Cyril, who were the luminaries of the so-called School of Alexandria; on the other shore of North Africa, the names of Tertullian, of

---

Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline, in «Currents in Biblical Research», 15, 2017, pp. 149-178, here p. 158.

[36]   See M. Grau, *Rethinking Mission in The Postcolony. Salvation, Society and* Subversion, Bloomsbury NY, T&T Clark, 2011; J. Ingleby*, Beyond Empire. Postcolonialism and Mission in a Global Context*, Bloomington IN, Central Milton Keynes, Author House, 2010; D. van der Water et al., *Postcolonial Mission. Power and Partnership in World Christianity*, Claremont CA, Sopher Press, 2011.

[37]   For the relation between Christian missions and colonialism in Africa see: I.J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa,* Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1989. In Asia, see: L.A. Newson, *Old World Diseases in Early Colonial Philippines and Spanish America*, in D.F. Doeppers - P. Xenos (eds.), *Population and History. The Demographic Origins of the Modern Philippines*, Quezon City, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1998, pp. 17-36; B.S. Turner, *Globalization, Religion and Empire in Asia*, in P. Beyer - L.G. Beaman (eds.), *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 145-166.

[38]   International Theological Commission, *Faith and Inculturation*, Introduction, 5, 1988 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html. See also: P. Gordan (ed.), *Evangelium und Inkulturation (1492-1992). Salzburger Hochschulwochen 1992*, Köln, Styria Verlag, 1993. For Christianity as African religion see: L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1989; K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1996.

St Cyprian, and above all of St Augustine stand out, who is to be thought of as the brightest light of the Christian people. I could mention the famous and holy hermits, Paul, Anthony, Pachomius, the initial founders of monastic life, which thanks to their brilliant example has been spread thought the Eastern and Western regions. Last I cannot pass over in silence St Frumentius, known as Abba Salama, who raised to the rank of bishop by St Athanasius, was the apostle of Ethiopia»[39].

Scholars are debating the origins of Christianity in Africa. Act 8, 26-39 speaks of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. This tradition continues through Augustine, Origen and Tertullian[40]. Anyway, it never spread beyond Egypt, Ethiopia and Nubia in Northeastern Africa. Others[41] find Christianity's origins in Africa starting in the fifteenth century, with the arrival of European missionaries south of the Sahara. However, African Christianity and theology is 'neither simply a product of western missionaries evangelizing in Africa nor a totally independent African formulation'[42]. Subsequently, it requires a different approach[43].

After centuries of political, economic and religious expansion[44], cultural inclusion is a challenge for both theology and religion. What is at stake it is not only a 'wider narrative', but three issues in particular: the first one is that of epistemic and hermeneutical understanding, along with the ability to distinguish historically contingent characteristics from essential ones. The re-reading of history can be a good strategy to build a common narrative, which is able to include and to balance different points of view and interpretations. The second issue is theological: a theology that does not take into account the variety of cultures can

---

[39]   Pope Paul VI, *Africa Terrarum*, I, 3, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19671029_africae-terrarum.html.

[40]   D.T. Ngong, *Christianity in Africa*, in E.K. Bongmba (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, Hoboken NJ, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 208-219, in particular pp. 209-212.

[41]   E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*, Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1995, pp. 1-97.

[42]   So Mbuvi, welcoming the Ngong's thesis, see: A.B. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline*, in «Currents in Biblical Reseaerch», 15, 2017, pp. 149-178, here p. 157.

[43]   Some scholars propose more radical narrative of the Christianity origins in Asia and Latin America, see D. Franklin Pilario et al. (eds), *Asian Christianities*, in «Concilium», 54, 2018, 1, pp. 7-11, here p. 7. See also E. Dussel, *The Epistemological Decolonization of Theology*, *ibid*., 2, 2013, pp. 21-31. Dussel highlights that during the Middle Ages, the Latin-German Europe was peripheral and isolated by the Asian-African Mediterranean system. All of a sudden, Latin-German Europe started to expand, and the Modern Age was characterized by the 'death of the Mediterranean Sea' and by the 'birth of the Atlantic ocean'. This thesis was already argued by Braudel.

[44]   W.D. Mignolo - A. Escobar (eds.), *Globalization and the De-Colonial Option*, London - New York, Routledge, 2009.

hardly be the expression of these cultures[45]. As the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith pointed out, each culture has its own way of accepting and interpreting the faith in Christ and of expressing it so that it is consistent with its identity[46].

The third issue is the interaction between theology, politics, and economy, because any colonial experience involves all these dimensions of life, and creates a specific idea of 'enemy'. Decolonial thinking requires a transdisciplinary approach:

«Thinking de-colonially means, precisely, to delink from thinking 'disciplinarily' (e.g., sociologically, economically, anthropologically, artistically, etc.). In that regard, thinking de-colonially and the de-colonial option are not 'new interpretive tools' but another thinking grounded in border epistemology rather than in Greek philosophy»[47].

In different ways, these issues – the need of epistemic and hermeneutical understanding, a new relation between theology, religion and culture, and a transdisciplinary approach grounded in border epistemology – show the complexity of the decolonial option and the need to re-think the global framework.

4. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was to conduct an exploration of decolonial theology as an general issue and an open process. On the one hand, decolonial theology is part of decolonial thinking, that is, a radical epistemic and hermeneutical turn, requiring a new paradigm and a new methodology. On the other hand, I emphasized the opportunity provided by a dialogical approach of decolonial theology. Its implications go beyond theology: politics, society and economy are intrinsically part of any attempt to change, to the point that we cannot imagine a theological turn without involving those fields. For this reason, decolonial theology is a long-term project. While formerly colonized countries

---

[45]   When African biblical scholars, trained in western academies, returned home, they discovered the inadequacy of methodologies and presuppositions learned in the western academic institutions. See J.S. Ukpong et al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, Leiden, Brill, 2002, p. 10; K. Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations 1967-2000*, New York, Peter Lang, 2002.

[46]   Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiam*; International Theological Commission, *Faith and Inculturation*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html.

[47]   W.D. Mignolo - A. Escobar (eds.), *Globalization and the De-Colonial Option*, p. 11.

have to realize their decolonization, in order to take control over their epistemic independence, the formerly colonizers put up with it and this causes a tension within the countries of the colonizers. Furthermore, they are continuing to practice a sort of colonization, i.e. maintaining the control on the economy of their former colonized countries. At the same time, they have to limit the consequences of the formal colonization of the past (such as immigration, political disorder, economic instability, etc.), which is mostly caused by the absence of a full appreciation of the situation and by an inadequate decolonization process. The risk is the introduction of a contraposition between 'us' and 'them'.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council did understand the importance of providing a 'dialogical method' in theological practice rather than work on Church doctrine. From their point of view, dialogue was helpful for overcoming prejudices, contrapositions, and in order to share different points of view and experiences. Dialogue is a way to find out about other perspectives: sharing the past is a way to build the future.

As we saw, the human relations approach underlying the Negotiation Table offered important suggestions and analogies with the dialogical approach promoted by the Second Vatican Council. We already highlighted also their important differences, analyzing this experiment as an 'ideal space' in which to realize the dialogical approach. The depth of dialogue is able to realize mutual recognition, without hiding disagreements, to transform storytelling into a common narration and into a new common experience. This kind of dialogue is characterized not by revenge or assertion, but by the legitimation of the 'other', even if before this was our enemy. Re-thinking, or re-appraisal, takes place only slowly, and especially requires time for its assimilation by local communities. This dialogical process changes, above all, the perspective of all interlocutors and transforms their identities. The interweaving of religion and politics involves the decolonial theological turn into a new narrative and re-thinking of the public space.

Decolonial theology looks to the past, because it requires the building of a common narrative, composed of several histories, all simultaneous and inter-connected by colonial powers and by colonial differences. It has an inclusive approach to the past, unlike Western or European one, which often excluded non-Western and non-European experiences. At the same time, decolonial theology looks to the future, because of its

research into a new paradigm of rationality[48]. As many scholars have highlighted, the decolonization of knowing is the prerequisite for political independence.

At present stage, decolonial theology is an ongoing process, requiring the readiness of all actors involved (both former colonized and colonizers). The greatest risks come from the prevalent feeling of revenges and from a too strong influence of politics on theological thinking. For this dialogue is a good way to avoid radicalism and extremism, but also to build a new and common perspective. Decolonial theology is certainly a great challenge, requiring us to balance the relation between center and periphery in a different way and to open the future to new possibilities.

---

[48]   In the Introduction to their book, Mignolo and Escobar explain their point of view: «Master paradigms are just but options dressed with universal clothes. One of the consequences of decolonial options is to make clear precisely that master paradigms and abstract universals (left, right and center) are still caught in imperial desires» W.D. Mignolo - A. Escobar (eds.), *Globalization and the De-Colonial Option*, pp. 1-2.