

# Can Christian Ethics be Saved? Colonialism, Racial Justice and the Task of Decolonising Christian Theology

Studies in Christian Ethics  
2024, Vol. 37(1) 3–18  
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DOI: 10.1177/09539468231213557  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sce



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## Abstract

Christian ethical practice has historically fallen short, when we consider the histories of European colonial violence from the sixteenth century and the transatlantic slave trade in Africans. Today, Christian ethics can fail to uphold a standard of resistance to contemporary evils, including racial injustice. To what extent can Christian ethics break with this history and be saved? This article considers the ongoing colonial tendencies of Christian ethics and theological education in Britain, before considering the centrality of decolonisation, primarily 'of the mind'. In the latter part, it turns to examples of anti-colonial Christian ethics, in the work of Robert Beckford, Anthony Reddie, Anupama Ranawana and Anderson Jeremiah. It ends by giving attention to what decolonisation might mean in religious and theological education, as we seek to create spaces for learning in which all people's bodies, minds and voices are welcomed and honoured.

## Keywords

Colonialism, decolonisation, slavery, race, theology, education, justice

## Introduction

I approach this matter of decolonising Christian ethics as a womanist. This means that my reflections on the question of colonialism, and thus decolonisation, hold together a multiplicity of problems. This includes the construction of race and the various iterations of racial inequity which are the main theme of this article. But the problems of sex, gender and sexuality; class, capitalism and classism; disability and ableism; and of

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course, ecology and environmental destruction are all implicated.<sup>1</sup> I cannot discuss in depth all of these issues in this article of course, but I want to state explicitly that these matters are in my view, interweaved and interconnected. It is also worth saying that there have of course been innumerable forms of colonialism throughout human history which deserve our specific attention, rather than being oversimplified through sweeping generalisations. I will be thinking particularly here about European (and particularly British) ‘Christian’ colonial activity, especially in the Caribbean where in striking fashion, slavery and colonialism have been considered to be consistent with notions of Christian ethical living. The work of decolonising Christian ethics requires we recognise the role Christian theological ethics has played in such history. I have entitled this article ‘Can Christian ethics be saved?’ because the question of decolonising Christian ethics raises urgent and pressing questions which do not in my mind, have a predetermined answer, in a similar way to Willie James Jennings’s question, ‘can white people be saved?’<sup>2</sup>

The language of decolonisation in relation to academic institutions emerged as Africans in Africa wrestled with the ongoing impact of western, European epistemologies, perspectives and pedagogies on their continent. The ultimate goal of decolonisation was ‘emancipating African institutions from neo-colonial and Eurocentric orientations’.<sup>3</sup> Within this framing, decolonisation is fundamentally a matter of African people liberating themselves from ways of thinking and knowing that are foreign to them. It is a task that involves the development of a consciousness of the self, and of one’s cultural identity. It depends first of all, upon what is called the ‘decolonisation of the mind’.<sup>4</sup> Decolonisation is not the end point, but the means to an end. It is the path taken collectively to freedom, to being oneself, to thinking, speaking, teaching and learning, as one’s African self. In the context of Europe or North America, talk of decolonisation has come to mean a range of things. A helpful definition is found within *Decolonising the University*:

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1. Womanism as a term is derived from novelist Alice Walker’s *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). It is subsequently adopted for theological use by Katie Cannon in her essay ‘The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness’, in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985), pp. 30–40. Linda Thomas’s expansive definition is particularly helpful, where she defines womanism as ‘a theory and practice of inclusivity, accenting gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ecology’ that ‘exemplifies reconstructed knowledge beyond the monovocal concerns of black (male) and (white) feminist theologies’. Linda E. Thomas, ‘Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm’, *Cross Currents* 48.4 (1999), pp. 498–99.
  2. Willie James Jennings, ‘Whiteness Isn’t Progress: How the Missionary Project Went Horrifically Wrong’, *The Christian Century* (7 November 2018), p. 28.
  3. Emnet T. Woldegiorgis, ‘The Emergence of Decolonisation Debates in African Higher Education: A Historical Perspective’, in E.T. Woldegiorgis, I. Turner and A. Brahim (eds.), *Decolonisation of Higher Education in Africa: Perspectives from Hybrid Knowledge Production* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 26.
  4. Chammah J. Kaunda, ‘The Denial of African Agency: A Decolonial Theological Turn’, *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13.1 (April 2015), pp. 75–78.

First, it is a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view. Second, it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis.<sup>5</sup>

Christian theology has a deep and grave connection to European colonialism; indeed, it was one of the core ingredients that made it possible and sustainable from the fifteenth century onward. It provided a narrative to justify the economic exploitation, cultural decimation, social destruction and spiritual violence done to indigenous peoples. Narratives and logics are often more challenging to change than government policies, even though the latter are not often changed easily. In Anderson Jeremiah's words, colonialism is 'not only physical but ideological and philosophical, providing a worldview to dominate and rule'. It 'occupies not only physical space but cultural, religious, political, educational, and intellectual spaces'.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the shift towards independence for many of Britain's ex-colonies, and a move away from having a white elite physically stationed in overseas territories, the spectre of coloniality continues to haunt global communities and the British population and establishment. The nationalistic longing to return to a perceived golden era of a white, Christian Britain is a sign of such a haunting as Anthony Reddie has argued in *Theologising Brexit*.<sup>7</sup> Coupled with this, is the government and population's more recent resistance to welcoming refugees or asylum seekers who are not white or considered potentially Christian. Christian theology is often silent in response to such contemporary issues as Reddie has also highlighted.<sup>8</sup> Historically, it is important to recognise that Christian theology was not simply affected by colonialism. Christian theologies of empire were not simply a by-product of the colonial era; they helped to justify, sustain and sacralise it. Christian ethics provided some of the core building blocks that made Christian colonialism acceptable. This theological justification is exemplified most explicitly in the first encyclical to mention colonisation, *Dum Diversas*, which was published in 1452:

We weighing all and singular the premises with due meditation and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso – to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods

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5. Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, 'Introduction', in Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (eds.), *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto, 2018), p. 2.
  6. Anderson Jeremiah, 'Race, Caste, and Christianity: A Post-Colonial Analysis', *International Review of Mission* 109.1 (May 2020), p. 85.
  7. Anthony G. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Postcolonial and Liberationist Critique* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 18–21, 89–97, 194.
  8. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit*, pp. 100–101.

whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.<sup>9</sup>

Colonialism was enacted as a Christian ethic with a clearly presented biblical and theological rationale. It was presented as a manner by which Christians were called by God to exist and move in the world against those considered heathens. Christian theology provided a narrative, a logic and a conviction that would underpin centuries of mass exploitation in terms of labour; cultural and psychological trauma; and environmental destruction, all in the name of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Colonialism as a Christian ethic was rooted in a theology of empire, which dehumanised indigenous peoples from around the world by presuming them to be godless, worthy of exploitation and undeserving of dignity and respect. It had an anthropological emphasis, in that it denied the basic humanity of peoples encountered in Africa, Latin America, Asia and beyond. It was ecclesiological in that it assumed the western church based in Europe to be the only church and the true church. It was soteriological in that it assumed salvation would come through the violent dominance of the European over the global heathen, rather than through the work of Christ and his Spirit. It was an eschatological project that imagined the end of all things would be brought about through the violent victory of the European church over those considered enemies of Christ. The kingdom of God was conflated with the kingdoms of Portugal, Spain, England, France, The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to consider therefore, the historic power of Christian ethics as well as the ongoing influence of Christian theology today. I am not suggesting that Christian theologians or ethicists are the most sought-after voices today, particularly in critical analyses of colonial history. But I do believe that we have something important to contribute, since present-day Christian ethicists function—whether consciously or unconsciously—within a discipline which served the purposes of colonisation. Theological education itself, in which many Christians ethicists and especially theological ethicists are involved, was a colonial project in places like West Africa and the Caribbean. Christian education was an education in whiteness.<sup>11</sup> Carlton Turner makes this evident in a lecture entitled ‘Re-thinking African Enslavement’ given at Wells Cathedral in March 2023. In speaking of the Anglican Codrington College in Barbados which was established on a plantation and remains there to this day, he explains:

9. Indigenous Values Initiative, ‘Dum Diversas’, Doctrine of Discovery Project (23 July 2018), <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/dum-diversas/>, accessed 18 July 2023.

10. Thanks to Alexander Douglas who, in his response to my article, reminded me of the relatively late colonial endeavours of Belgium and Germany in Africa during the late nineteenth century.

11. See Keith Watson, ‘Colonialism and Educational Development’, in Keith Watson (ed.), *Education in the Third World* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 1–46; Peter Cruchley, ‘Ecce homo ...? Beholding Mission’s White Gaze’, *Practical Theology* 15.1–2 (2022), pp. 64–77; Eve Parker, ‘World Christianity as a Critique of Whiteness in Theological Education’, *Ecumenical Review* 74 (2022), pp. 45–57.

The death of ex-colonial governor, ex-captain general and commander-in chief, and plantation owner Christopher Codrington in 1710 meant the bequeathing of his Barbadian estates to the ownership of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) with one very odd condition: that it always hold three hundred negroes on the plantation. Codrington's desire was very clear. He wanted a school established for missionary work to the peoples of the colonies ... They were to be the vehicles of his vision of a better society. It was a vision of a society, unfortunately, where the place for the Negro was still working the plantation.<sup>12</sup>

The problem of Christian ethics—both the practice and the discipline—is located in the promulgation of ideas such as this, and the lack of critical response from many who have simply overlooked this history. The task of Christian ethics must involve confession. For those of us concerned with the impact of Christian theology on life and lived experience, including in relation to matters deemed public or political, this history cannot be ignored. Christian ethics is implicated in the problems of colonisation, but there is also a huge opportunity to reckon with this history and reframe Christian ethics in a liberating and anti-colonial frame. The potential for this is located in the kinds of Christian ethics that have sought to resist and push against colonial Christian ethics. Liberation theologies, Black and womanist theologies, Asian and postcolonial theologies have all developed a cacophony of voices which speak out against the colonial norms common in some forms of European theology. Christian ethics is *already* decolonised in such spaces which can often be either overlooked or devalued by those within the field of academic research and education. Within these scholarly corners, Jesus is not white, barely a man (in relation to the standards of popular toxic forms of masculinity) and is clearly aligned with the impoverished and oppressed. This is the Jesus of Black hermeneutics, who Anthony Reddie calls 'a Black hero'<sup>13</sup> and Robert Beckford calls a 'dread Christ'.<sup>14</sup> But this Jesus is often displaced, and replaced instead with a whitened version whose greatest love is empire, and who rules by coercive force. In turn, the disciples of this Jesus follow his example, in all things, being conformed to his image in the interactions with those deemed 'foreign' and inferior. And so, to discuss the decolonisation of Christian ethics is to first ask, whose Christian ethics need to be decolonised and what might decolonisation mean in the context of Christian ethics? Who and where might the agents of such a process be? And what opportunities might be opened up through a commitment to anti-colonialism and liberation in the field of Christian ethics? It is to these questions that I will now turn.

## **From Colonised to Decolonising: Theological Education and Christian Ethics in Britain**

A significant part of my work at Durham is summed up to some extent in the term decolonisation. As a lover of history, I am often concerned with understanding how things

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12. Rev. Dr Carlton Turner, 'Re-thinking African Enslavement', Lecture, Wells Cathedral, 2023.

13. Anthony G. Reddie, *Working Against the Grain: Re-Imaging Black Theology in the 21st Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), pp. 75–92.

14. Robert Beckford, *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998), p. 73.

came to be as they are, before attempting any type of change or, dare I say, transformation. This is why it has been interesting for me to look back to the history of theological education, for example. It is important to me to understand what the ambitions and objectives have been for those who started such enterprises, especially in relation to historically colonised peoples. Christian ethics, as a discipline, forms part of the theological education task through research and teaching, and so much of what I have been considering in terms of decolonising theological education will also apply here. The history of British theological education is bound up in the history of British colonial domination as we have seen in the case of Codrington. Some colleges are discovering the extent to which they have benefited financially from the transatlantic slave trade and colonial enterprise. Carlton Turner explains for example that funding from the transatlantic slave trade enabled the establishment of several colleges in Britain, some of which remain active to this day. St. Aidan's established in 1846, Cuddesdon in 1854, Lichfield in 1857, and Salisbury in 1860 were all sponsored by funds obtained through the selling of African people as slaves.<sup>15</sup>

Christian theology then, including ethics, must be examined for traces of this colonial history. Forensic examination of financial records is one of the more obvious and somewhat easier tasks within this. But what can be harder to detect are the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ideologies, expectations and perceptions that can impact the research we undertake, and the teaching or sharing of knowledge that we do. Eve Parker has considered what colonial theological education can look like today in her work with the Common Awards network. She writes:

For the most part, Western perspectives dominate the academy, particularly in the context of the UK, and class divisions appear to be ingrained in the dominant structures of theological learning. Those with power in theological education have too often neglected the theological truths from the majority world, have pigeonholed certain theologies as 'contextual' and created a hierarchy of knowledge(s), and in doing so have failed to acknowledge that all theology is contextual ... Theologies from the bodies of people of colour, the marginalised, the poor, the indecent, and the subaltern are predominantly absent from most theological curricula and reading lists ... Eurocentric theology dictates the patterns of learning and contemplations on God as a result of how colonialism's power dynamics have shaped and controlled systems of knowledge and education ... In other words, those who have benefited from the privileges of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism own the means of knowledge production, particularly in the West, and thereby determine what does and does not qualify as worthy or necessary knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

This indictment of theological education in the UK raises several important points for us in our consideration of decolonising Christian ethics, and working towards racial justice within the discipline. Primarily, we find again that we neglect certain experiences if we seek to speak about single issues. The problems of class and race are held together in Parker's analysis. In the same way that colonialism was an economic venture, determined

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15. Turner, 'Re-thinking African Enslavement'.

16. Eve Parker, 'World Christianity as a Critique of Whiteness in Theological Education', *Ecumenical Review* 74 (2022), pp. 47, 48–49.

by an elite who acted upon the lives of those deemed dispensable, so theological education can maintain elitism by treating some as collateral damage, unworthy or unnecessary in the task of producing knowledge. This raises the question of whether the Christian ethics being produced remains captivated by a certain kind of imagination that decides some are only ever students while others should be consistently positioned as teachers. Who do we imagine to be the theological ethicists of our day and who do we imagine are unworthy of such a title? What is shaping these suppositions?

Secondly, Parker highlights for us the important matter of the way we categorise the various voices we do hear. Even if we do welcome a range of perspectives, it is still possible to place them within an imagined hierarchy of knowledge. To put differently, we might develop a canon (whether in our own minds or on paper) of those essential voices in Christian ethics, and then consider others to be optional additions. What patterns shape who we consider to be core or peripheral in our research and teaching?

When considering the task of decolonising Christian ethics, we are speaking about transforming a particular kind of Christian ethics. The focus is on the forms of Christian ethics which feign neutrality and presume they offer universal truth. The failure to name one's context is a refusal to acknowledge both the location and the limitations of one's work. Black theology provokes all theologians to name the context and agenda which motivates their work, simply by using the word 'black' which can agitate so many. The replies come: 'why do need black theology? Isn't that racist?' These questions emerge sometimes with aggression, provoked by the naming of race. It is also a shock to the system, since white theologians often do not name where their theology is located and what its objectives are in regard to race, colonial history, etc. If black and womanist theological ethics is motivated by the concern for black liberation and flourishing, then what is white Christian ethics motivated by? Decolonising theological ethics means recognising white theologians' work as contextual, as Jason Drexler-Dreis explains:

Decolonial theorists are not interested in doing away with all of Western modernity; rather, they seek to undo the 'myth of modernity' in order to transcend its constraints on being and thinking. Enrique Dussel describes the myth of modernity as the European belief that Europe is the most materially and intellectually developed and civilized area of the world, and that it therefore has the task of educating non- or lesser-developed peoples ... Constructive decolonial thought entails putting Western intellectual traditions in their proper place and identifying their historical points of origin.<sup>17</sup>

It is this constructive decolonial thought that should be the concern of Christian ethics. This should, I hope, also quell the fear that decolonisation is about the erasure of white voices and western theology. Decolonisation is inevitably a destabilising process, and this cannot be denied. In the words of Frantz Fanon: 'decolonization is always a violent event'.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean bloodshed is inevitable—though this

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17. Jason Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Theology in the North Atlantic World* (Boston: Brill, 2019), pp. 2, 3.

18. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Wilcox (New York: Grove Press, 2007), p. 1.

has been the case in the decolonisation of nations which Fanon is discussing—but it does mean upheaval, shifts and even what might feel like chaos is to be expected. It is not comfortable to reorder power in any context. And this is what decolonisation is about at its core. It will cost something of everyone who has benefited from the existing norms, and this is why it is resisted and rejected. It might also be watered down to ‘inclusion’ or ‘diversity’. However, the objective of decolonisation is not to improve representation within an existing system or structures, but to challenge the very basis on which those systems and structures have been built. Decolonisation recognises that the very foundation of a system, an organisation, a philosophy or a practice, must be critiqued for its implicit assumptions regarding the superiority of the white and European. This is for the sake of all people now and in the future, since colonial violence distorts the coloniser as well as the colonised. In the process of decolonisation, we must always be mindful of the potential for colonialism to simply be replaced by neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism is a simple evolution of colonial violence that may appear more subtle; it ‘assumes power by reactivating entrenched structures of discrimination and prejudice, such as race and caste, legitimized by Christianity’.<sup>19</sup>

Christian ethics must be prepared for such violent reordering, if what is wanted is decolonisation and not a nicer, less intrusive alternative. The target of decolonisation within Christian ethics is the kind of work that presumes Europe and America to be the centre of the church, and of relevant thought and enquiry regarding God and the Christian faith. It addresses the assumption that Christian ethics can be researched and taught, without proportionate leadership from those who represent the largest Christian contingents globally. It challenges the kind of Christian ethics that longs for a ‘golden era’ in which western voices and perspectives were considered the most important. Decolonial theology (including ethics):

[m]akes an epistemic shift in its understanding of the historical encounter with a divine reality by starting from viewpoints grounded in intellectual traditions shaped by the experience of the violent imposition of Western modernity. Second, situated within these intellectual traditions, decolonial theology contests modern/colonial ways of defining reality, the human person, and cosmic relations in light of communities’ historical encounter with divinity and proposes options for thinking, acting, and relating otherwise.<sup>20</sup>

Decolonisation in Christian ethics depends upon us recognising the widest epistemological range, as we consider the questions and queries which might be addressed in the field. It requires us to resist the perception that the practical or embodied has less status than the purely theoretical. It invites us to consider the kinds of knowledge that are experiential, embodied and mystical as valid and important. It should also invite us to imagine the public and community contributions the field might make, in light of the urgent demands facing humanity as a whole, and certain groups in particular. There are some who might suggest that decolonisation should lead to Christian ethics

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19. Jeremiah, ‘Race, Caste and Christianity’, p. 85.

20. Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Theology*, p. 3.



withdrawing from public dialogue in order to break with its colonial tendencies. However, I would suggest that anticolonial voices in the field have something essential to contribute.

## Decolonised Minds, Anti-Colonial Christian Ethics

The process of decolonisation is a form of reordering power that depends upon the liberating of minds. It depends upon individuals being liberated in their thinking, often through the insight and education of those who belong to their wider community. To put it in theological terms, it is reminiscent of having the veil removed (2 Cor. 3:13-15); having one's eyes or ears opened (Mark 7:35, John 9); or being awakened (Eph. 5:13-14). It is for this reason that decolonisation of the mind is held up as having such importance for those who belong to historically colonised peoples. Chammah J. Kaunda explains:

Decoloniality is meant to get into the core of the African psyche in order to dismantle power relations and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of self-negation or negated subjectivity. It is concerned with disturbing the solidified inferiority complexes, duality perception of reality and the 'geo-political' hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear from this description that decolonisation is a task of epic proportions. Its impact must be traced through the thoughts and instincts of historically colonised people as well as in the structures and systems that exist in a given social, political, economic and cultural space. Kaunda begins with the mind of the African—as his example of those descended from colonised peoples—in his designation of where decolonisation must begin. Decolonisation is not a process that begins with the best intentions of even the most progressive white people, or other allies. It has to begin as a movement of liberation that has its locus in the minds of those who are coming to terms with a history of oppression, and the necessary actions to free their present and future selves. The mind of the colonised is conditioned by colonialism, to hate itself, to despise what is deemed African, Asian or indigenous and to view what is European as superior. This was the ultimate goal of colonialism: to possess the mind in order to own the body more determinedly.

In describing decolonisation of the mind in more concrete terms, Kaunda describes it as a process by which the African person recaptures a forgotten sense of self and the world. It requires an exploration of what has been hidden, buried, suffocated within the self. He explains decolonising the mind as:

[s]eeking to reclaim the essential unity between self and other, self and the entire cosmos, consciousness and unconsciousness, spirituality and materiality, organic and inorganic, science and religion, sacred and profane. It is a recovery of an integrated approach to reality. It is a mode of theological education that is grounded in the quest to recover a self-consciousness that upholds a radical theology of oneness (singular) of life driven from the common source.<sup>22</sup>

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21. Chammah J. Kaunda, 'The Denial of African Agency: A Decolonial Theological Turn', *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13.1 (April 2015), p. 75.

22. Kaunda, 'The Denial of African Agency', p. 87.

Here Kaunda describes the epistemological shift, and indeed a philosophical shift required for the decolonising of African minds. The ‘self-negation’ (in the words of Carlton Turner),<sup>23</sup> which the colonised mind imbibes, must be addressed, for Kaunda, through theological education which returns to the ‘materio-spirituality’ which represents the African way of viewing the world.<sup>24</sup> Africans, through colonialism, have been steeped in a dualistic philosophical framework which opposes the sacred and secular, the body and the spirit and the material and spiritual more broadly. This way of viewing reality is a misnomer for Africans. Instead, decolonisation means returning to a ‘materio-spirituality’ which ‘integrates all cosmic relationships of God and humanity, the living and the dead, self and collective, humanity and non-human creation, humility, metaphysical and psychic powers, healing and wholeness’.<sup>25</sup> This unified view of the world does not seek knowledge for its own sake, but is driven by the desire for a more just future. This just future is understood as holistic, encompassing all elements of human experience and recognising them as interconnected.

This description of the decolonised mind and decolonised theological education raises several important points for us in relation to Christian ethics. Primarily, it speaks to the impact of colonial theology not only on white people—who can be centred even in decolonisation conversations—but on people of global heritage. The task of decolonising the mind is about freeing the minds of historically colonised people and their descendants who have been taught to see themselves as inferior. It has resonances of Paulo Freire’s focus on ‘conscientisation’: the critical consciousness which allows people to notice and understand what has caused their oppression.<sup>26</sup> To say that this work of decolonising the mind must come before any other task is to recognise that attempts to diversify reading lists or increase diversity in recruitment will fail, if there has been no success in ‘get[ting] into the core of the African psyche in order to dismantle power relations and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of self-negation’.<sup>27</sup> If, as Carter G. Woodson has asserted, there has been not a lack of education but a specific ‘mis-education’ of ‘the negro’<sup>28</sup> as well as other historically colonised peoples, then theological education must equate to a *re*-education. If theology is going to be of any benefit to humanity as a whole and those of global majority heritage in particular, it must take on this task. This re-education involves a reclaiming of the global story of Christianity, in terms of history, as well as in the development of the broad range of Christian theologies and spiritualities. But it also must include challenging the hegemony of white European perspectives which undermine a holistic understanding of life and being, and restrict the

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23. For a thorough consideration of self-negation in the context of African Caribbean life see Carlton Turner, *Overcoming Self Negation: The Church and Junkanoo in Bahamian Society* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020).

24. Kaunda, ‘The Denial of African Agency’, p. 86.

25. Kaunda, ‘The Denial of African Agency’, p. 86.

26. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), pp. 9, 39–41, 58.

27. Kaunda, ‘The Denial of African Agency’, p. 78.

28. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington DC: Associated Publishers, 1933), 29–31.

spiritual and theological to the religious life. Christian ethics is one area of theology which more easily transcends the binaries between belief and practice, the sacred and the secular. The question remains: in what ways can Christian ethics contribute to such a task?

The problems of Britain's colonial Christian heritage and its theological roots have been highlighted by several important voices in the UK. They are examples of decolonised minds, which must lead us as we work towards decolonisation in Christian ethics. Robert Beckford, Anthony Reddie, Anderson Jeremiah and Anupama Ranawana have all brought to our attention the avenues Christian ethics might take as a discipline to recognise and address its contribution to colonial dynamics historically and in the present. In the next section, I examine ideas which each of them contributes as examples of decolonised and anti-colonial Christian ethics. They represent, respectively, commitment to developing Black faith and spirituality in ways that are geared towards liberation; a willingness to engage with contemporary public and political issues through a theological lens; a commitment to critiquing the Church and theology's colonial tendencies; and a determination to challenge humanity's destructive relationship with the earth.

Robert Beckford is the first to examine the ongoing impact of colonialism on African Caribbean Pentecostals whose faith was inherited in part from colonial missionary activity. In *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity*, Beckford argues compellingly that due to the colonised history of places like Jamaica, Black Pentecostals in Britain remain captivated by colonial theologies which prevent them from integrating their faith with their lived experience and struggle as Black people. In his postcolonial interpretation of exorcism, which centres the story of the demoniac in Mark 5:1-10, he explains what decolonising might mean for the Pentecostal understandings of the demonic, and especially what it means to 'cast out':

To cast out is to remove an occupying or harassing malevolent spiritual force from the physical body and also social world. It is in opposition to bewitchment in so much as it directly confronts and overcomes the spiritual malevolence diagnosed in witchcraft. In conclusion, exorcism in the Bible, while by no means static in meaning, appears in the Gospel of Mark with political implications. The exorcisms of Jesus are political acts demonstrating the expulsion of the occupying colonial force out of the mind and body of Israel. This interpretation not only facilitates a religious critique of empire but also allows me to view exorcism as a socio-political reality, whereby to exorcize is to engage in struggle against witchcraft, that is, structural evil.<sup>29</sup>

Within Pentecostal contexts, this reading will not be commonly heard. Due in part to the centring of literal readings of the scriptures as well as an unequivocal belief in demonic spiritual powers, this passage would traditionally be interpreted as a straightforward story of a person being freed from demonic control by Jesus. Any social or political reading would not be prioritised, and this, for Beckford, is the sign of a 'bewitched' Christian faith. Bewitchment is, for Beckford, 'the colonial oppression and social ineffectiveness

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29. Robert Beckford, *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 70.

of many Pentecostal churches'.<sup>30</sup> Decolonised ethics for Beckford in this case is seen in the capacity to transcend the binary between the spiritual or religious and the public and political. Decolonised ethics engages with the social realities of inequity, hierarchies and exclusions, rather than retreating to an individualised focus on personal piety. It awakens Black people, as historically colonised peoples, to their own power to examine, critique and define.

Anthony Reddie's analysis of Brexit offers a public theology that puts Britain's colonial tendencies front and centre. In his examination of the motivating factors that led to Britain's departure from the EU, he does not allow the church, Christians or Christian theology, or we as theologians to escape from accountability. Far from being a simply political manoeuvre, Reddie argues that this decision was rooted for many people in a particular theological imagination:

What underpinned the Brexit phenomenon was an unresolved set of religious and theological ideas that have helped to shape the national identity. Essential to the 'development' of the populist trust of British (more specifically English) nationalism is a conflation of religion and economic and political expansion abroad, namely the link between Christianity and empire.<sup>31</sup>

Reddie goes on in multiple places to note the lack of engagement with such theological ideas by white scholars, though there have been some exceptions of course. If decolonisation requires confession, then this is clearly an area for deep examination. Reddie along with Carol Troupe have recently compiled an edited book called *Deconstructing Whiteness, Empire and Mission* in which some are starting this work. It includes some helpful voices in this regard such as Eve Parker, Al Barrett, Cathy Ross, Mike Higton and others.<sup>32</sup> To deconstruct whiteness is, in my view, to ask how in the course of constructing race, white Europeans imbibed ideas and committed to particular violent practices which continue in ever-evolving forms today. Not all white people conform to such historic ways of being of course, but it is inviting critical exploration of how colonialism has distorted white humanity, especially in terms of their relationship to global peoples. Theologically it asks, what kinds of idolatry are European cultures prone to, because of historic lust for power over global populations? Of what must supposedly 'white', 'Christian' nations repent? And what role might theologians play in bringing such repentance about?

Anderson Jeremiah, one of the foremost postcolonial theologians in the UK, offers us yet more reflection, this time bringing the conversation to bear on the context of colonialism in India. It is important to note that British colonialism has looked different in the various places it has been experienced. While we can simplify the history of British colonialism down into particular moments or events, there are many variations in approach, and in outcomes. Jeremiah makes this very clear in his own critique of British colonialism in India. While recognising the explicit role of Christian theology in helping to legitimate

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30. Beckford, *Documentary as Exorcism*, p. 4.

31. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit*, p. 14.

32. Anthony Reddie and Carol Troupe, *Deconstructing Whiteness, Empire and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2023).

European exploitation and enslavement, he also condemns Christian mission for its complicity in upholding and exacerbating existing forms of inequity. In India's case, this was seen, for Jeremiah, in particular relation to the caste system which continues to have an impact even today:

Within Christianity in South Asia, the roots of ongoing caste conflict between various caste communities are well documented. Hostility between Syrian Orthodox, non-Syrian, upper caste and lower caste, and Dalit Christian communities continue to plague the church in India. Often caste identity is a subtext for denominational differences and a major factor in the church polity. Sadly, the caste-based worldview that mirrors a racialized worldview of difference and revulsion to one another shapes much of Christian experience. Interestingly, roots of these differences could be traced back to early missionary encounters that in many ways legitimized caste practice within Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

Here we find a similar point to Beckford's, in that decolonial theology for Anderson also relates to South Asian churches being liberated from social orders which oppose the message of the Christian faith in which all people are brought into one family of God. Here also, Christian theologies have been proven inadequate for equipping Christians to resist conforming to the *colonial* 'patterns of the world' (Rom. 12:2). Rather, Christian theologies, promoted by missionaries, sustain the unjust status quo. In response, Jeremiah argues that 'through post-colonial enquiry, we must be able to challenge and deconstruct neo-colonial tendencies that tend to reactivate entrenched structures of theological prejudice and decolonise Christian mission'.<sup>34</sup> The notion of reactivation is important; it reminds us that historic patterns and structures can often remain dormant in the communal body of the church. Though, to continue the analogy, the body may seem healthy, and this may cause us to deny the ongoing risk of illness, like a virus, it may well have adapted in order to survive, or may simply be awaiting an appropriate stimulus to re-emerge.

Anupama Ranawana, a Sri Lankan postcolonial feminist and eco-theologian in the UK, writes of the importance of Asian theologies in resisting the capitalist motivations of the colonial project which continue to lead to the plunder of the earth. She explains that 'the deep-rooted sinfulness of capitalism and plunder is underscored in the political theology that we find in Asia, particularly Asian theology that allies itself to Third World liberational thinking'.<sup>35</sup> It is this thinking that is not only non-white but also located beyond the 'global north', that also needs to be centred in anti-colonial Christian ethics. Theologies from global populations that are bearing the brunt of environmental destruction brought about by the overdeveloped world are also responding to colonial dynamics that bring race, class and environmental concerns together, as Ranawana explains in *A Liberation for the Earth: Climate, Race and Cross*:

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33. Jeremiah, 'Race, Caste and Christianity', p. 96.

34. Jeremiah, 'Race, Caste and Christianity', p. 98.

35. Anupama Ranawana, 'Rage against the Port City: Southern Theologies Mobilising for Climate Justice', *Politics* 43.2 (2023), p. 244.

The modern, capitalist world economy is one in which colonizers and colonized were systematically bound into relationships of extraction, colonization and dispossession. It is also important to note here that this is not simply a tale of European colonization, but also of the collusion of elite and upper-class/caste persons in the colonies with the colonizer to deem certain lands and certain communities as lesser and disposable.<sup>36</sup>

For Ranawana, the problem of colonialism for Christian ethics lies also in the disordered relationship humanity has with the earth, as the result of capitalism. The industrial revolution which is celebrated as a turning point in the history of British economic development was funded by the enslavement of Africans as a source of free labour, and the exploitation of global lands and peoples. The extraction of natural resources was and has since been essential to the development of global capitalism, as has the pollution of the seas, and the destruction of the natural environment. Postcolonial theologies which recognise these links also have an important place in decolonising Christian ethics. Theologies from the 'global south' which centre the earth must also be heard in the violent re-ordering of exploitative colonial patterns.

In each of these cases, we find ample opportunities for Christian ethics to fulfil the demands of the decolonisation task. Firstly, by being honest about the problems of colonialism which undermine Christian faith, life and practice. And secondly, by taking the ongoing impact of such tendencies seriously. Following the example of such voices, and intentionally developing the next generation of these traditions, must be a priority.

## Conclusion: Anti-Colonialism as Liberation for All

I hope it is clear that the argument for decolonising Christian ethics is not simply a case of pandering to what some people have labelled (often pejoratively) 'political correctness' or 'identity politics'. It is a call to reassess the motivating factors which shape the discipline, and the power we have given to some at the expense of others. It is an opportunity to shape our communal life, which must always be examined and questioned lest we fall into a complacency that prevents genuine community. We must be intentional, since the default will always lead us to privileging the same groups over the same 'others'. The fruits of such a determination have the potential to be enriching for all people, since all suffer under a colonial dynamic of research, inquiry and teaching about God and our lives in the life of God. In a recent resource produced by the American Academy of Religion on *Equity-Focused Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom*, educators shared stories of what the process of decolonising their classrooms has meant. We do not all have classrooms in a literal sense, but the learning can be true whether we lecture, preach, run community projects, engage with public issues or such-like. Three themes emerged for me that I would like to leave with you as an encouragement: academic excellence, joy and belonging.

Miguel De La Torre, a renowned Latino theological ethicist, writes to counteract the notion that decolonising knowledge amounts to lowering the bar to allow in more diverse

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36. Anupama Ranawana, *A Liberation for the Earth: Climate, Race and Cross* (London: SCM Press, 2022), p. 47.

perspectives. This can be what is presumed when we speak about embracing a wider range of voices. The logic being that the door is equally accessible for everyone, and so if there is a lack of scholars from a particular group, this simply reflects their personal or communal failings. Decolonising is therefore resisted in order to maintain 'excellence'. Instead, De La Torre explains:

To build a pedagogical methodology solely on Eurocentric religious, theological, or philosophical thought is to produce an epistemology on shifting sand. Worse, when the focus in the classroom is exclusively on Eurocentric thought, students' ability to grasp reality is undermined. Bringing the perspectives of communities of color into the classroom is not some empty exercise in political correctness, nor is it an inconvenient attempt at tokenism. It is a methodology that halts the regurgitation of death-dealing Eurocentric theoretical paradigms detrimental to the world's marginalized. It is a praxis concerned with understanding the world, and just as important, transforming the world.<sup>37</sup>

The same could be said not only about pedagogical methodology but about the discipline of Christian ethics as a whole whether or not it is taught in a classroom. To build a discipline like Christian ethics 'solely on Eurocentric religious, theological, or philosophical thought is to produce an epistemology on shifting sand'. Such Christian ethical work undermines the capacity for learning, reinforces 'death-dealing Eurocentric theoretical paradigms', lacks curiosity and prevents transformation.

The second factor is that of joy which again may not always feel familiar in the field of academic research, teaching and learning. Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds writes about Black joy in his classrooms, which is brought about when learning 'provides space for the variety of learners and engagement of ideas to be validated within the classroom'.<sup>38</sup> Traditional classrooms, he argues, are committed 'to the reproduction of normative texts and ideas and a focus on point-based assessments' which 'have erased joy and experimentation from the university classroom'. 'Joy-filled classrooms', on the other hand, 'begin with identifying historical moments, texts, and questions that are central to our students' and develop 'curricula, opportunities for engagement, and creative outcomes in response to those'.<sup>39</sup> In this reflection we find more signs of the possibilities that are opened up through a decolonising approach to teaching and learning. The question is raised for Christian ethics within or beyond the classroom—to what extent it enables experimentation and the asking of new questions? In research, in teaching, in learning, is there room for joy, as we move beyond normative expectations in terms of the people we count as ethicists and the topics we imagine belong here?

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37. Miguel A. De La Torre, 'Developing Academically Rigorous Classrooms', in Molly Bassett (ed.), *Spotlight on Teaching: Equity-Focused Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom* (Atlanta, GA: American Academy of Religion, 2022), p. 20.

38. Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds, 'Black Joy, Full Participation, and the University Classroom', in Molly Bassett (ed.), *Spotlight on Teaching: Equity-Focused Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom* (Atlanta, GA: American Academy of Religion, 2022), p. 35.


39. Edmonds, 'Black Joy, Full Participation, and the University Classroom', p. 35.

And finally, the importance of dialogue and belonging which is examined by Kevin Minister who explains the importance of dialogue for reorienting colonial dynamics. If colonial Christian ethics assumes certain bodies hold all knowledge, while others are simply empty vessels to be filled, then ethics in an anti-colonial mode must break away from this through practices such as dialogue:

Dialogue practices break down the sense of the teacher as the source and arbiter of knowledge and the students as disembodied, objective learners through questions that require students to connect their own experiences to course content. Furthermore, students begin to perceive each other as partners in learning as they reflect on how their and their classmates' different experiences inform their perspectives on the course content.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, as researchers and educators, we have knowledge that we hope to share, and this is what has qualified us for our roles. But it is also true that the reader or the student have their own forms of knowledge. They have stories to tell, truths to communicate and perspectives that bring challenge and contribution to the learning space and to our research. The teacher, the writer, the researcher, the academic might also be taught as we welcome in the various voices which have gifts to offer the wider community as we learn together. In the welcoming, we pay particular attention to those voices that are often considered unimportant, and we notice when they are not there: the voice of the migrant, the refugee, the person living in poverty, the student who is neurodiverse, or comes from a global majority background. We remember the women, the person with a stutter, the one who is treated with suspicion because of their sexuality or gender. Anti-colonial Christian ethics refuses to define people as 'good' or 'evil', or 'knowledgeable' or 'ignorant'. It resists the temptation to decide the questions that are worthy of consideration, it attends to power, and the voices heard and not heard, to the bodies present and absent even as the discussion and debates take place. In this way, the classroom or learning space might become a place for education not only in intellectual knowledge but in how to be in the world, as those seeking to embody the ethical demands of the Christian faith.

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40. Kevin Minister, 'Dialogue and Equity in the Religious Studies Classroom', in Molly Bassett (ed.), *Spotlight on Teaching: Equity-Focused Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom* (Atlanta, GA: American Academy of Religion, 2022), p. 25.