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Decolonizing science-engaged theology

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ABSTRACT

This piece is about the value of decolonization for teaching and doing science-engaged theology. I argue that decolonization should be seen as a useful tool that helps students, teachers, and scholars to re-imagine the modern distinction between science and theology/religion.

1 | Introduction

The call to decolonize the curriculum is intensifying at UK universities. This is a good thing. It signals a collective aspiration to make deliberate moves to distance teaching, learning and scholarship from the ethnocentrism that has plagued it for centuries. Those who teach theology and religion should also rightly take up the call to decolonize the curriculum.

In this paper, I argue for the decolonization of what is known as science-engaged theology (SET). The debate about what SET is and how it should be done is ongoing. On a basic level, SET is what it says on the tin—it is theology that seriously and deliberately engages with the social and natural sciences. In practice, there are many ways to approach the interface between theology and science as evidenced by scholarship from theologians like Barbour (1966), Peacocke (2001), and Polkinghorne (2009), to name a few.

More recently, SET has been given new life aided by funding from the John Templeton Foundation (JTF). The stated goal of JTF is “to advance efforts by theologians to substantively engage with the sciences in their research and inquiry about the divine and other spiritual realities” (JTF, 2023). Their definition of SET in the call text is one-directional, with the sciences informing theology. The goal of SET as they envision it is to “enhance understanding of key theological ideas, claims, and systems of

thought, and enable us to evaluate, revise, and improve our theologies in fruitful ways” (JTF, 2023).

In their introduction to a recently published special issue on the topic in *Modern Theology*, Perry and Leidenhag (2021) describe SET as the interrogation of assumptions about the empirical world embedded in theological thinking and the use of science as a source alongside the traditional sources of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. They also emphasize SET as a way to move theology beyond the “tired options of modernity” (p. 245).

The conundrum for scholars who want to engage in and/or teach SET in a way that also takes decolonization seriously is that the distinction between theology and the social and natural sciences implicit in the definition of SET is a key part of the colonial agenda. An agenda which in turn is tightly bound up with modernity.

Many forms of what could feasibly be considered SET in the broadest sense can be traced to well before modernity and the recognition of “science” and “theology” as separate categories of thought. Physicist Tom McLeish (2014) does this, pointing to the work of medieval thinker Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (1175–1253). But to call the work of Grosseteste SET would be to commit the historian's cardinal sin of presentism precisely because it is premodern work. This is the key point made by historian Peter Harrison (2017), that before modernity “science” and

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“religion” as separate categories were not in operation. The upshot is that the notion of a theological approach that “engages” with science is a manifestly modern notion.

Harrison also argues that there is significant conversation between the goals of conceptual history and the new mode of SET in the sense that they are both concerned with reimagining (and reclaiming) parts of the Christian tradition that were lost as a result of modern patterns of thinking (Harrison, 2021). In other words, the rub is not in the call for interdisciplinary work to be done between theology and science, the rub is in the assumption of the disciplinary boundaries that create the need for it to be codified as such.

As a sociologist of science, it is clear to me that the importance of SET in an educational setting lies precisely in the element of deep, mutual, interrogation. And it is a profound challenge. My approach to science includes the understanding that, like all knowledge, scientific knowledge is continuously mobilized, sustained, and contested. Science is a social institution. It is also based on decades’ worth of research that underscores the human values inscribed in the knowledge we create. What questions are asked of the material world and who gets to ask them matters because it shapes our understanding of the world around us.

What teaching SET could and should provide is a way for students to interrogate the empirical worldviews of the theologians and scientists whose work they read. It should also provide a way for students to challenge their own worldviews alongside their instructors. Given the interconnectedness of disciplinary distinctions, colonialism, and modernity, I feel strongly that decolonization could and should be part of the SET agenda. Authors like Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Walter Dignolo (2010, 2020) provide a rich set of arguments for decolonizing epistemology, what Dignolo terms epistemic disobedience (Dignolo, 2010). One of these arguments relevant to this discussion is an appreciation of how contemporary disciplinary boundaries and their consequences for understanding what it means to be human are part of the colonial mindset.

What this means, among other things, is that decolonizing SET needs to include an interrogation of disciplinary boundaries and their rightful purviews since they play a central role in the colonial matrix of power (Dignolo, 2010). It also needs to avoid privileging Western constructs, whether theological or scientific. There is an argument to be made that reconnecting “science” and “religion” is particularly critical considering the construction of the boundary is so deeply implicated in modernity and consequently the colonial agenda (Styers, 2004).

But what does decolonizing the curriculum mean in the context of SET, and is it a viable thing to do? In short, I think it means reframing the purpose and rationale of SET, and I think it is not only viable but necessary. Here, I provide reflections on these questions in the form of two notes of caution followed by a (strong) word of encouragement in the hopes that theology and science educators will come to see the decolonizing agenda as a valuable pedagogical resource and that scholars of SET will come to see it as integral to their work.

2 | First Note of Caution: The Advisability of Using Decolonization as a Metaphor

There are some criticisms of the notion of “decolonizing the curriculum” that are worth taking into consideration when

designing any course with decolonization in mind. Tuck and Yang (2012) have written a seminal paper on the concept of decolonization in which they emphasize its specific meaning. For them, decolonization is about land. It is about the repatriation of land from settler to native. The point that these authors make is that paying close attention to the specific meaning of decolonization generates questions about the viability of the concept as a metaphor—including as a metaphor for making changes to university curricula (in fact, the paper that I am referencing is called “Decolonization is not a metaphor”).

For me, their criticism means that if decolonization is to be used as a metaphor, we need to ask a crucial question about the meaning of decolonization in the given context. Specifically, in the context of teaching, *what is the land in need of repatriation and to whom should it be repatriated?*

I would argue that taking “the land” in this instance to signify “the university” does not get us very far. Universities situated in the United Kingdom are traditionally the seat of colonizers. Likewise, many universities in settler colonies like the United States, Canada, and Australia are traditionally the purview of the settler colonizers. The curriculum follows suit. However, if the land in question is understood as “knowledge,” the purchase of the metaphor increases exponentially. Questions like who owns knowledge, who gets to ask questions, and who gets to answer them cut straight to the core problems that the move to decolonize the curriculum attempts to address.

Importantly, colonization takes ownership of both land and the governance of that land and its people (Bhattacharya, 2021). A decolonizing agenda requires both the repatriation of land and a disruption of the systems of governance put in place by the colonizers/settlers. Colonizer governance is entangled with a whole host of forms of oppression, and a decolonizing agenda rightly addresses the various forms of oppression built into it. Again, when “land” is understood as “knowledge,” decolonization gains purchase to signify a disruption of the governance of knowledge. Who decides what counts as knowledge? Who decides what counts as valuable and valid knowledge? Who decides what counts as (capital T) truth? In this sense, decolonization can be understood as a querying of the benchmarks set by the hegemony of Western modes of thinking. It asks us to question the authority of knowledge claims, particularly from whom that authority derives and why.

3 | Second Note of Caution: Not Taking Decolonization Far Enough

The second note of caution is a pragmatic one. Currently, examples of decolonizing the curriculum in a university setting often take the form of replacing some of the required readings with readings either by people of color or readings that take a race-critical approach to the topic at hand (or both). This is not in itself a bad place to start. It goes directly to the question of how the voices of non-White people can effectively be brought into the teaching of any subject in order precisely to mitigate the dominance of White voices to date.

Ceding intellectual territory is unsettling by nature because it involves a challenge to the superiority of Western-centric

patterns of thought. To take a practical example, adding new texts to a reading list often if not always requires taking other texts off that same list. This will likely feel unsettling, particularly for instructors, because it invokes the discomfort of decentering the intellectual ground that you stand on. Surely, we cannot take this text about Darwin off the reading list without losing something essential about what we are teaching.

The note of caution is that while it is a good place to start simply adding BIPOC voices into an existing framework characterized by centering and privileging the colonial agenda is the equivalent of treating decolonization as a metaphor. This is where decolonization becomes a proxy for social justice-driven inclusion, which is precisely what Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against.

Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us that *decolonization is unsettling by necessity*. To be successful, it has to involve a restructuring of power dynamics and a ceding of intellectual territory, including the access to power and resources associated with it. Some of that power may be located in the authority of theology as a field. What counts as theology? Who gets to do theology? Whose theology are we privileging in our science-engaged theologies? And of course, some of the power will be located in “science.” The same questions apply. What counts as science? Who gets to do science? Who gets to ask questions of the material world and when we ask questions about the material world whose voices are we hearing in reply?

This discussion about decolonizing the curriculum focuses on SET courses and is addressed to instructors who will likely have a background in theology and/or religious studies. It might be tempting to place particular focus on the sciences that indeed have a history of favoring certain voices over others in conjunction with ambitions to produce universally applicable knowledge (Shapin, 1995).

But it is important we remind ourselves that decolonization is as much an issue in teaching theology as it is in teaching science. Applying this logic specifically to courses in SET requires thinking carefully about the ways in which *both* theology and science are rooted in the colonial agenda, as well as that the contrast between them is a colonial construct. Most importantly it requires finding ways to disrupt that construct. Decolonizing the curriculum then is about creating a space for that disruption and allowing for the necessary unsettling that it will involve and speaking honestly and generously about the parts of teaching that present challenges both to our students and to ourselves as teachers. Part of the challenge will be to reflexively interrogate the basic assumptions that drive the endeavors of SET.

As I see it, this has at least two consequences. First, properly ceding intellectual territory is going to change the practices of teaching more generally. For instance, decolonization could be used to query forms of assessment. Are there ways of sharing and holding knowledge that unfairly privilege some of your students over others? Recent debates on decolonizing the curriculum stress the ways in which curricula signal what kinds of knowledge we value. The authors of the Innovating Pedagogy 2019 Report (Ferguson et al., 2019) argue that decolonizing the curriculum should prompt instructors “to

examine our professional practices [...] enabling students to explore themselves and their values and to define success on their own terms”.

We inevitably carry notions of what counts as valid knowledge and well-articulated persuasive arguments. As scholar of literacy, race, and culture Ellen Cushman (2016) argues, this only becomes a problem when “what counts as valid is always judged against a baseline that privileges one group of people’s knowledge and forms of expression to the necessary exclusion of others” (p. 5). Decolonizing SET then has to include an interrogation of what the curriculum is signaling that baseline to be in *both* the “science” and the “theology” that we are teaching. What counts as valid science and what counts as valid theology in the science–theology intersection?

Cushman’s call to action is to acknowledge the importance of “actively seeking out pluriversal (rather than universal) understandings, multiple and varied (rather than singular and narrow) ways of expression, integrated (rather than siloed) exercises in validity and reliability, whole and active (rather than atomized and static) language uses in an effort to name and respect a range of ontological, axiological, and epistemological perspectives” (p. 5).

I do not have easy answers as to how this can be done in practice. That is because there are none to be had. How precisely any of this is achieved will depend on the context of specific courses and their institutional constraints. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind that Western hegemony stretches across not just the *content* of teaching but also the modes of thinking and the benchmarks of success made available in the educational setting. Reading something like Jeannie Kerr’s reflexive exploration of the Western epistemic dominance in academic spaces and how to resist that dominance through decolonial pedagogical practices would also provide a good starting point for those interested in putting decolonization into practice in their teaching (Kerr, 2014).

Second, it will require us to proceed by holding firm and attending to the ways in which SET is inevitably implicated in the colonial agenda. There have been several attempts to tinker with the binary, likely because scholars who have engaged with this new wave of SET realize that however one approaches it, a theology that engages with science sets up an uneasy power dynamic between two ill-defined centralizing concepts.

These debates over how to hold religion and science together are understandably live debates not just in SET but in the emerging field of the social study of science and religion. I have argued in talks and in conversations with colleagues that the only way out of this conundrum is to acknowledge that science and religion are both contested, ill-defined, and slippery terms. But also (and this is key) that precisely this characteristic of our object(s) of study is the object of inquiry. Both the sociology of science and the sociology of religion begin and end with an acknowledgment that there is essentially no such thing as either science or religion. That is what is interesting about it. And it should be what interests us as scholars of science and religion. And by the way, when I say essentially, I mean *essentially*. There is no essence of science or essence of religion that can be straightforwardly analyzed either historically or in the present like an

actor in the world. You cannot have science and religion over for dinner.

There is widespread agreement about this being the case for science in the sociology of science. One example is the work of Steven Shapin who I paraphrased for part of the previous paragraph. His book on the Scientific Revolution famously begins with the sentence “There is no such thing as the Scientific Revolution and this is a book about it” (Shapin, 1996, p. 1). Bruno Latour is another example of someone who systematically applied his theological sensibilities to understanding scientific knowledge-making. In a chapter dedicated to the science and religion debate, he argued against expectations that science is often concerned with the unknowable and religion with the knowable (Latour, 2005). Likewise, comparative religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978), rather than attempting to define religion, set out to explore the development and mobilization of the term and its implication in society.

Randall G. Styers (2004) writes with confidence that the issue of defining religion is acute for the field of religious studies because its institutional legitimacy depends on a clearly defined object of study. Finding a definition of religion has been a concern for religious studies scholars for quite some time. However, I think Styers makes too quick a judgement implying that the institutional legitimacy of religious studies demands religion to be clearly defined. The sociology of science provides us with a useful example of how a slippery and ill-defined centralizing concept *can* function as the basis of a discipline and as a point of convergence for creative and disruptive scholarship. It does so by making the slippery nature of the centralizing principle its object of study. In fact, Styer’s own work on the role of magic in the creation of boundaries around science and religion for the project of modernity is a good example of the insights that can be gained by tracing how and to what end slippery terminology lives (contingently) in the world.

The same goes for SET through a decolonizing lens. The way in which both science and theology and the distinction between the two are implicated in the colonizing agenda does not have to mean that decolonizing SET is impossible. But it does mean proceeding always with that implication in mind.

Latour famously proclaimed that we (meaning humans) have never been modern (Latour & Porter, 1993). His main targets are the distinctions between nature and society, and human and things, but understandably, for Latour, a rejection of the mindset of the moderns included a rejection of the distinction between science and religion. He also hints elsewhere at the core issue of eschewing the distinction in SET by writing that talk of reconciliation between science and religion is *an even worse* offence than talk of conflict (Latour, 2013, p. 322).

Properly decolonizing SET requires a confrontation with the modern mythos of science as a despiritualized description of the natural world fundamentally distinct from religion. I would argue further that far from confusing the goals of teaching and doing SET, the decolonizing lens helps crystalize it by opening a door to queering the distinction between science and theology. It helps teachers and practitioners of SET to engage with *engagement*, to ask questions about what engagement can look like

without the distinctly modern presupposition that engagement is necessarily *re-engagement*.

4 | Reframing: How Decolonization Can Help us Reach our Educational and Scholarly Goals

There may understandably exist concerns about the pressures of decolonizing the curriculum in the context of SET. The feeling may stem from a sense that introducing science into a course on theology is already a complex task given that it often involves introducing students to esoteric scientific knowledge that they may not already be familiar with. Adding an element of decolonization feels like a step too far.

The unsettledness may also stem from a feeling that decolonization is someone else’s purview. This paper came about because a colleague asked me to introduce decolonization to seminary instructors in the United Kingdom in the United States. He did so on the assumption that I was already familiar with the topic. Thus, the request came with an apology, “I know for you [decolonization] is ‘old hat, but’” It was not. My only guess is that the assumption came from the fact that I am a woman of color. But I had to research decolonization as best I could to give the talks that I ended up giving. I did that work because it felt important enough to me. Still, I did it on the understanding that working out the specifics of how it should be done has to be the work of each instructor who is responsible for designing their SET courses as they are, their students and their institutional constraints. The same goes for scholarship in SET. Each scholar will have to do the work of interrogating the modern assumptions in their theological approach. In short, *I will not do this work for you*. And nor should anyone else. You have to decide whether it is important enough to do the work required.

That said, I would hope that thinking about decolonizing SET in light of the deeper questions mentioned above (What is the land in need of repatriation and to whom should it be repatriated? Where does the power lie and how can that power be disrupted/questioned?) helps illustrate how decolonizing SET is not only helpful but necessary for SET scholarship and teaching.

This leads me, finally, to my word of encouragement. I think we can think of decolonizing SET less as an addition to an already complex task and more as a helpful instrument to guide us toward a habit of wondering always about the power dynamics of any institution, including science and theology, and the modern distinction between them. Thought of this way, it could start to feel like less of a time-consuming “extra chore” that we would rather not do and more like another useful tool in our pedagogical and analytical toolboxes.

Bhattacharya (2021) writes “De/colonizing educational research requires understanding western intellectual canon-building dating back to the European Enlightenment and disrupting such superiority of knowledge construction through knowledge democracy, intellectual diversity, and pluriversity.” The same principles hold for decolonizing education itself and for the SET scholarship that informs our teaching. But it will require an approach to science (and knowledge more generally) that takes the sociopolitical dimensions of science seriously. An approach that

denies those scientific claims to authority based on objectivity or “the view from nowhere” (Shapin, 1995) and instead accepts the constructed nature of all knowledge-making as a social institution.

This is why I felt that it would be important to introduce a lecture on science as a social institution in our course at Durham University. The aim of the lecture is to introduce the students to tools they can use to explore knowledge-making as a social phenomenon. Because it is a course on science and theology, I deliberately include a section on what understanding knowledge as a social institution means for understanding theological knowledge-making. We now also teach a session on technology that draws on the work of sociologist Ruha Benjamin. Benjamin's work on science, medicine, and technology focuses on the relationship between innovation and social inequity (Benjamin, 2019, 2022). Introducing Benjamin's work on technology and artificial intelligence disrupts the superiority of Western intellectual canon-building by cutting a straight path not only to understanding how science and technology are made but also how it influences groups of humans differently. It provides an example of why who gets to make decisions about science and technology matters and the role of imagination in that decision process. Importantly, it also introduces students to the process of reimagining the uses of technology in less marginalizing ways. Decolonizing the curriculum should help students feel less like the role that science and technology play in further marginalizing traditionally marginalized groups is inevitable.

But a decolonial approach to SET can and should also challenge modern notions of science as theology's opposite. Clapperton Mavhunga's work on science and technology in Africa is an excellent example of scholarship that challenges the assumption of despiritualized science and technology at every step (Mavhunga, 2017, 2014). His work is not easy to engage with for Westernized readers steeped in the modern mindset, and that is the point. Much of the driver of Mavhunga's work is to show that African philosophies of science and technology resist easy translation into modern categories. The spiritual and the technology are not in need of re-engagement because they were never *disengaged*. We have never been modern.

I wrote above that decolonization can be understood as a querying of the benchmarks set by the hegemony of Western modes of thinking. I also argued that the sociology of science and religion inevitably requires contending with not one but two highly complex and contested organizing principles, and that the contested nature of those organizing principles is a feature, not a bug. Put another way, the complexity of science and religion as social institutions, including how these institutions and the distinction between them were constructed as part of the colonial agenda, is the object of enquiry. Likewise, the tensions that arise in the intersection between science and theology, far from making decolonization more complex, help guide us to precisely where we need to focus our enquiries. What are the assumptions that lie at the heart of the tension? What happens if we question those assumptions? Do some of the tensions dissipate and do others appear in their stead?

Decolonization as a disruption of the governance of knowledge then becomes a reflexive exercise. The interrogation of scientific knowledge through a theological lens and the interrogation of

theological understanding using scientific knowledge has the capacity to disrupt the privilege of the self-understanding of each of these fields and allow for an imaginative space of dialogue where any number of intellectual partners can join in the conversation. To return to some of the points made above, in order to be effective, it is crucial that opening that imaginative space starts with an interrogation of the built-in assumption that there is a real boundary between these two modes of thinking. The very boundary that locks SET into not just engagement, but *re-engagement*.

Incorporating decolonization into SET would follow the long tradition of what is arguably the core of SET of understanding natural and social scientific findings as one of many sources for theology to draw on when thinking about the material world. Likewise, if the political agenda of SET, as Perry and Leidenhag (2021) would have it, is both to increase the confidence of theologians to draw on scientific knowledge and to expand theology's “tired options of modernity” (p. 245), decolonization makes for a particularly constructive approach to both teaching and doing SET. It can function as a way to open theology up further by refusing to arbitrarily define the purview of theological thinking. Conversely, the application of theological thinking to scientific knowledge, particularly in partnership with decolonization, can help reinforce an understanding of science as a social institution. That in turn would aid practitioners, theological educators, and their students, to hold fast to the notion that “scientific findings [...] both presume and require interpretation” (Perry & Leidenhag, 2021, p. 248) as has long been the underlying assumption of both SET and the sociology of science.

To be clear, I am *not* saying that engaging with the decolonizing agenda and applying it to SET scholarship and teaching will not take work. It surely will. What I am saying is that it will be worth it because it provides a way to move beyond the assumptions of modernity and, most acutely, the distinction between science and theology. Put more strongly, there can be no replacing the tired options of modernity for SET without decolonization. If the core assumption of a distinction between science and theology is retained coupled with a privileging of Western knowledge, SET as a project will remain thoroughly modern.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to the AAAS DoSER team for inviting me to share my thoughts on this topic, to the Revd. Prof. David Wilkinson for providing comments on an early draft of this manuscript, and to the anonymous reviewers for engaging so thoughtfully with the text.

Conflict of Interest Statement

I confirm that none of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

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