
Decolonising Practice: Pathways, Insights, and Experiences from the Field of Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy

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Power and its outworking within international development has for decades been a much-debated topic (see, for example, Elliott 1987; Lister 2000; Gaventa 2006; Hammett 2019). The primary focus of discussions, particularly those centred around practice, has been on power asymmetries within the sector; that is, between donors and organisations located in the “Global North,” and “local” communities and partner organisations in the “Global South” (Elliott 1987; Lister 2000).¹ More specifically, significant attention has been paid to power differentials within “partnerships,” as well as on the lack of representation of those from the Global South in positions of decision-making power within organisations based in the Global North (Lister 2000; Brinkerhoff 2002; Abrahamsen 2004). The development sector’s colonial roots have frequently been invoked in these conversations, said to be behind the supremacy of Western knowledge and power that persists in development practice today, and one of the reasons why some have referred to development as a neo-colonial endeavour (see, for example, Escobar 1995; Kothari 2006).

While colonialism has indeed featured in conversations on power within international development, then, in recent years the term “decolonisation” has gained considerable traction. Spurred by the growth and implications of the Black Lives Matter movement and disproportionate impact of COVID-19 globally, decolonisation has become a term that encompasses concerns related to power, while

bringing the lens of race to the forefront of discussions. Calls for the sector to decolonise have focused in particular on the ways in which its colonial legacy continues to impact issues related to, amongst other things, decision-making power, representation, organisational culture, and language. Organisational responses to critiques in these areas have comprised a range of initiatives, such as more intentionally including those of Global Majority² heritage in board and staff positions of influence in the Global North; increasing support for organisational efforts to decentralise so that decision-making moves closer to communities in the Global South; and renewing emphasis on internal dynamics in need of addressing, along the lines of anti-racist work. Some have also sought to increase awareness of the importance of the language used in the sector, because words that are part of its established vocabulary, such as “development,” “donors,” and “beneficiaries,” are said to perpetuate narratives of superiority and inferiority that enable neo-colonial practices and systems of thought to persist, unnoticed and unchecked (see, for example, Rist 2007 on “development”).

In addition to calls for specific concrete changes to organisational practice, advocates of decolonisation within international development have also highlighted the systemic dynamics in need of addressing. Some point to the colonial logics underpinning the structures of power within the sector; for example, the logic of superiority associated with “Whiteness,” which

¹ The terms “Global North” and “Global South” are contentious within the sector. One of the arguments against their use is that they encompass hugely diverse countries and regions of the world, and as such, have a generalising tendency and obscure more than they elucidate; another is that inherent within the terms is a hierarchical structure and the implication that those in the Global South are in some senses “second-class” in comparison to those in the Global North (Ainsworth and Byatnal 2022). Nevertheless, these remain the terms most widely used to refer to regions of the world that primarily differ on economic grounds and will therefore be used in this introduction.

² The term “Global Majority” is one that first emerged in the UK “to reject the debilitating implications of being racialised as minorities,” and is understood to be “a more accurate descriptor of those labelled as ‘ethnic minorities’ or ‘diverse minority communities’” (Campbell-Stephens 2021, 4).

perpetuates a systemic form of racism that often remains hidden and thus unaddressed (Kothari 2006). Whiteness here refers to cultural practices, beliefs, and behaviours associated with those racialized as “White,” that while commonly perceived as neutral and therefore, “unmarked and unnamed” (Frankenberg 1993, 1), operate as the standard against which all other cultural practices, beliefs and behaviours are measured. Harmful systemic-level dynamics connected to Whiteness include that of “White Saviourism” (Cole 2012), which is embedded in the logic of superiority noted above and in essence, works to centre those of White European heritage as the key actors in the sector (Khan, Dickson and Sondarjee 2023).

What is particularly important to draw attention to in relation to these systemic-level conversations on decolonisation is the logic of “coloniality,” first introduced by Anibal Quijano (2000) although rooted in the “decolonial theory” of Frantz Fanon (1961), amongst others (see, for example, Césaire 1972; Dussel 1985). For Quijano, while colonialism refers to “the historical, economic, and legal process by which Europe appropriated the American continent”—in other words, to something concrete and tangible—coloniality refers to the “ongoing cultural structure” through which the notion of the civilized West and barbarous non-West is reinforced and perpetuated (Fregoso Bailón and De Lissovoy 2019, 358-359). Thus, the logic of coloniality sustains colonialism by ensuring the continuance of its practices yet “without formal colonies” (Kho 2023, 52). Importantly, these practices have not only entailed the continued systematic marginalisation and repression of other ways of living and being, but also of other ways of *knowing*, imposing the colonisers’ “patterns of producing knowledge and meaning” on the dominated to the extent that these have become universalised (Quijano 2007, 169). In summary, then, coloniality is the term used to describe the ongoing impact of colonial relations on all contemporary societal systems—whether political, economic, social, or epistemological—which although hidden, is real and pervasive (Duvisac 2022, 2; Tom 2022, 566).

Against this backdrop, “decoloniality” can be understood as “a call for completing the unfinished business of decolonisation in the present century,” in order to restructure global relations and bring into being a “new era” free from the dominance of the Global North (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020, 191). The precise nature of this era must remain undefined, since decoloniality is neither “static,” nor “a lineal point of arrival” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 17); rather, it “seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the *only* framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought” (ibid., emphasis

added). As Quijano puts it, “[n]othing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnic should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnic is called Western Europe because this is actually...to impose a provincialism as universalism” (Quijano 2007, 177). This is important, and the response to such universality has been captured within the concept of “pluriversity,” which focuses on the relationality *between* different ways of living, being and knowing, calling attention to their points of “connection” and “correlation” in order to enable dialogue (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 1-2). As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh explain, the pluriversal “connects and brings together in relation...local histories, subjectivities, knowledges, narratives, and struggles against the modern/colonial order and for an *otherwise*” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 3). According to Mignolo and Walsh, one important way of opening up the possibility of such dialogue is to more intentionally seek to make these “histories, subjectivities, knowledges and struggles” visible, something we will return to below.

To summarise thus far, contemporary debates on decolonisation connect to long-running discussions on power in international development. Key themes that the lens of decolonisation and decolonial theory bring to the discussion include the importance of recognising and acknowledging the positionality that societal actors, whether institutions, organisations, or individuals, carry with them into the spaces they inhabit; the necessity of systemic approaches that look beyond what is immediately apparent; and, connected to this, the significance of epistemology—that is, *how* things are known within international development. Decolonial thought has been growing in influence and importance as an area of focus within the sector. In relation to humanitarianism in Europe specifically, Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa notes that a decolonial approach

challenges Eurocentric analyses, foregrounding the experiences and knowledges of the intended targets of humanitarian aid. It poses questions not so much about the political will, operational implementation and technical capabilities of humanitarians as about the perpetuation of colonial power relations in seemingly benevolent activities.

Decoloniality asks: where do we start the story? Who has the microphone and who usually doesn’t? What do we consider expertise? What are the implications of Eurocentric bias in knowledge production? Do our practices and knowledge systems contribute to the struggle against colonial power relations? (Rutazibwa 2019, 66)

These are all pertinent questions, and ones that various contributors within this special issue unpack. An important critique in relation to the movement for decolonisation within international development, however, concerns the danger that it becomes another programme driven by the Global North, or by Whiteness, that is then imposed on all others. Thus, in relation to practice within the sector, it is important to be cognisant of where calls for decolonisation originate, and also of who is driving and leading any responses that are set in motion.

In terms of Christian relief, development, and advocacy organisations specifically, as several contributors note in their articles, colonialism and coloniality actively work against the values many such organisations uphold and seek to live out, such as justice, equality, reconciliation, and love, to name a few. Christian theologies of power also bring a challenge to the status quo within the sector. As I (Nina) argue elsewhere, where colonising power—interpersonal and systemic—is in operation within organisations, powerholders must, through the power of God’s Spirit, “yield their power and move to the margins to listen intently to and amplify those voices and perspectives less often heard, allowing them to change the shape and nature of the organization” (Kurlberg 2021, 72). The theological rationale for this is the self-giving love of Christ, also enabled by the power of the Spirit (ibid. 2021, 68). According to such theologies, engagement in decolonising initiatives is therefore vital for Christian organisations.

Worth mentioning in relation to faith-based organisations more generally is the work of the UK-based Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) on decolonisation. The JLI has since 2020 sought to mobilise discussion amongst academics and practitioners engaged with a range of faith communities specifically on the intersection between faith and decolonisation. Initiatives have included hosting a panel discussion on “Decolonisation, Development and Faith” at the annual Development Studies Association (DSA) conference in the UK, and a panel at the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) annual conference on the same theme. In addition to bringing together academics and practitioners with an interest in decolonisation and faith, the JLI is also engaged in research specifically on decolonisation and localisation.³

Overview of the journal

The articles in *CRDA* journal’s special issue on decolonisation provide a window into a variety of

Christian organisations and individuals that have embarked on their own journeys to decolonise their thought and practice. The purpose of the issue is not to advocate for one specific approach to decolonisation, but rather, to present the paths that different organisations have taken, as well as reflections from a range of individuals on this topic. Our decision to compile a special issue addressing decolonisation was largely due to the increasing focus on the topic within the relief, development, and advocacy sector, both in the UK, where Nina resides, and in the US, where Roland resides. As we have spent time engaging with contributors over the past eighteen months and keeping abreast of the conversations taking place, our sense is that this topic not only needs continued emphasis, but greater nuance as well, something we hope comes across through the articles in this volume. Our aim in compiling this journal issue and bringing these different authors together, is to contribute to the discussion and provide food for thought and inspiration for academics and practitioners, particularly those working in faith-based relief, development, and advocacy organisations. We are deeply grateful to each of our contributors, who shared so openly and, in many cases, vulnerably.

As we hope will have become clear from our introductory remarks, if our aim is decolonisation, positionality is particularly important. We have therefore sought to make explicit the social and cultural location of authors where possible, albeit to varying degrees and in a variety of ways. Our assumption is that this has a bearing on their work. Catherine Walsh expresses this in a poignant way; emphasising the need to move from “a posture of ‘studying about’ to ‘thinking with,’” she notes that this requires scholars to commit to “the making visible of his or her presence in this thinking” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 28). With this in mind, I (Nina) live, know, and write as a second-generation British Asian woman. My grandparents fled from Hyderabad Sindh, in what is now Pakistan, to the UK and Kenya during the partition of India in 1947, a fact I was acutely aware of during my childhood. I have studied theology and social science at both European and Asian academic institutions, and thus I know that I am implicated in coloniality at the same time as I am disadvantaged by it. For more than fifteen years now, my studies, publications and professional work have largely focused on issues related to equality, diversity, inclusion, and decolonisation. I (Roland) am very conscious of my own privilege as a White US American, though I fear not as much as I should be. I grew up in a family and church that taught me to care for others, but my deeper understandings of the themes discussed in this special issue likely began when I worked for a year in Guatemala after the 1976

³ <https://jliflc.com>.

earthquake. Marrying a young woman from the house where I lived and becoming part of a Latin American family did much to open my eyes, as did spending years in Central America later on. My three plus decades as a professor of international development helped me grow in my ability to listen and to make me increasingly aware of the importance of “handing over the stick,” a practice well-known in community development, but powerfully relevant for every area of our lives.

At this juncture, and before introducing the articles in this special issue, it is important to draw attention to some of the challenges that decolonisation as unpacked above presents to an academic journal such as this. As a well-established societal sphere of activity, academia is implicated in coloniality. It is guided by established systems and patterns of knowing and communicating, including rules regarding what ought and ought not to be done, and a degree of consensus on what makes an academic article “robust” or of “good quality,” that are embedded within colonial relations. As editors for an academic journal, we have admittedly centered the academy, along with its established rules concerning what constitutes “good scholarship.” Nevertheless, one of the initial steps we have taken to decolonise our practice has been to bring a diverse range of authors and approaches to the topic, and to allow their authentic voices to emerge. Readers might therefore notice that while we have formatted articles according to *CRDA*’s standard grammatical structure, we have not standardised language and spellings across the whole of this special issue, and we have sought to preserve the original tone of articles. We have also sought to make visible author positionality within each contribution, as already noted above.

Finally, a third initial step we have taken is to prioritise the concrete experiences of organisations and individuals within the sector. This resonates with Walsh’s emphasis on the importance of beginning with “praxis” in relation to decoloniality. Walsh notes that “[to] begin with praxis and the praxist activity of thinking-doing, is to turn academia and Western modern thought upside down” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 19). “Thinking-doing” in this context places emphasis on praxis while also capturing the interconnectedness and inseparability of theory and praxis, concepts which are often separated within Western thought or pitted against each other (*ibid.*, 7). The contributions in this special issue that begin with praxis in relation to organisations highlight the complexity of the contexts in which organisations find themselves. Aspects that are often the focus of organisational efforts to decolonise—whether specific relationships, activities, or processes—exist within much larger systems, with which they are intertwined. This interrelatedness means that reconfiguring power in one sphere of organisational activity will necessarily

reconfigure power in another sphere of activity. Reflecting on practice through decoloniality thus sheds light on multiple and varied sets of power differentials that need addressing in multiple and varied spheres of activity. An important insight that these contributions therefore bring to decolonial theories relates to the need for attention to dynamics at multiple layers, or levels of analysis.

This special issue comprises seven full-length articles, two discussion pieces, and three book reviews, encompassing diverse “internal” and “external” organisational and individual perspectives. Contributors are based in Ecuador, Guatemala, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, the UK, the US and Zimbabwe—almost as many countries as there are articles. Many authors are those whose work, education and lived experience spans the Global North and Global South, and academic and practice-based spaces.

The first three full-length contributions chart organisational pathways to decolonising practice. As noted above, many organisations have been wrestling with questions related to power and partnership for a long time, and actively engaging in organisational initiatives to adjust their practice and ways of working, although the language of decolonisation has often not been used. One contribution in this section has a historical focus, another is centred around organisational-level initiatives carried out during a more recent time period, and a final article homes in on localisation as a specific area of organisational practice that can enable decolonisation. Bringing a historical perspective to the special issue, Alain Epp Weaver and Emma Smith Cain introduce Memnonite Central Committee (MCC) as a case study of one organisation’s decades-long journey to decolonise its practice. Epp Weaver and Smith Cain share insights from MCC’s history, charting some of the major changes it underwent from its establishment in 1920, to the present day, carefully articulating the challenges, complexities and opportunities MCC has encountered over the past one hundred plus years. These changes have been guided by theological reflection on *missiological* concepts and questions. In the next contribution, Bikita Mahdi and Thobekile Ncube focus on a more recent time period, 2017-2023, exploring various initiatives through which the faith-based organisation Tearfund has sought to outwork decolonisation within its corporate culture, organisational structures, and ways of working. The theological motivation underlying this work came to the fore during the organisation’s Jubilee year in 2017, a significant moment in its organisational journey, which led to a focus on restoring relationships impacted by colonialism and/or racism. As well as intentionally working on organisational culture, power has been a

key focus area, with emphasis placed on “shifting” or “recalibrating” power. We then return to MCC to learn from five staff members from two NGOs, ANADESA and MCC, who have reflected collectively to author a case study set in Guatemala, based on almost twenty years’ work among Indigenous Tz’utujil communities. The authors argue that responding to colonial legacies has been enabled by the implementation of a localisation model that they view as a form of “reparations.” Based on flexibility and mutual learning, this way of working has helped create an environment in which decolonisation processes can occur within and between these two organisations.

The two full-length contributions that follow are based on insights from recent research processes carried out by two faith-based international non-governmental organisations; the first is a theological research process that was in and of itself guided by a decolonial spirit, and the second addresses the topic of reparations. In their contribution, Clark Buys and Maria Andrade introduce a theological research process carried out by Tearfund on the topic of economic and environmental sustainability. The research process, which intentionally sought to engage in regional “missional listening” and draw on perspectives from the Global South, is discussed by Buys and Andrade from the perspective of Latin American decolonial theory. As well as introducing the resultant “Abundant Community Theology,” the authors highlight both the value and challenges of Tearfund’s approach. Ann-Marie Agyeman and Anupama Ranawana then explore “reparations,” which they view as a theological imperative and key aspect of decolonising development. Their argument is that anti-racism work can be seen as a form of reparations. Using the findings from a piece of research carried out by Christian Aid in 2021 on race, ethnicity, and poverty, they explore how organisations can practically engage in this work.

The final two full-length contributions focus on specific aspects of organisational practice based on the authors’ experiences. The first is a research piece on decolonising data collection, and the second is an essay that draws out several organisational factors that enable decolonisation. In the first, Rebecca Samuel Shah explores the practice of organisations based in the Global North in relation to knowledge production and data extraction. Drawing on her own research in the slums of Chennai and Bangalore during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shah makes a case for decolonising data collection. In the second article, Toluwanimi Jaiyebo-Okoro argues that although many organisations highlight their support for decolonisation, current ways of working within the sector do not always enable organisations to actualise this. Jaiyebo-Okoro thus outlines four critical enabling factors (CEFs) for

decolonisation relevant for Christian Development Organisations (CDOs): lament, epistemic justice, diverse and inclusive representation, and the embrace of non-neutrality. This list is not exhaustive, but instead represents a starting point for organisations keen to decolonise their practice.

This special issue also includes two shorter discussion pieces, the first of which is an essay by Al Tizon, who argues that poverty is ultimately the consequence of the pursuit of wealth. Focusing in on the concepts of “Empire” and “Mammon,” Tizon touches on the relationship between colonialism and capitalism. His argument finds congruence with the work of Quijano (2000), who brings the lens of race to this relationship, arguing that racial hierarchies are embedded within capitalism (Quijano 2000, 536-537). Tizon argues that Mammon and Empire go together, and that when the church confronts Mammon, empire is also confronted. In order to destabilise the “imperial spirit,” less capital-based ways of doing development are needed. In the second discussion piece, Tracy Kuperus engages with Robtel Neajai Pailey’s thought on decolonisation within international development, focusing in particular on Pailey’s critique of the “White gaze” of development, and more generally, on the importance of acknowledging race within development practice. This connects to wider discussions on the influence of “Whiteness” within this sphere of activity. Kuperus concludes with suggestions for how Christians working in the field of development might avoid its White gaze.

Finally, the editors have included reviews of three recently published books: Graham Adams’ *Holy Anarchy*, reviewed by Jo Cribbin; Anupama Ranawana’s *A Liberation for the Earth: Climate, Race and Cross*, reviewed by Kuki Rokhum; and Al Tizon’s *Christ Among the Classes: The Rich, the Poor and the Mission of the Church*, reviewed by Cynthia Moody. Note that two of these are written by Tizon and Ranawana, who have also authored articles for this issue of CRDA.

The common ground underpinning the entirety of this special issue of the journal is the view that all humanity stands in equality before God. The authors represented here know the world we collectively inherited fails miserably to honor this basic idea. They call us to lament the pain and injustice of this world and to work together to imagine and open the possibility for an “otherwise.”

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