Postcolonialism and Intercultural Theology in Germany: Introductory Remarks

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As a result of migration and globalization, postcolonial theory and intercultural theology are becoming increasingly relevant and challenging.¹ While in the 1990s postcolonial and intercultural questions and theories were almost exclusively of academic interest in German-speaking countries, the question of how society deals with the ‘foreign’ has now moved to the center of public interest. At least since what has been dubbed the refugee crisis of 2015 we have been shown that we live in an ‘age of migration’.² In addition to the global scale

- 1 For introductions to postcolonialism established in German-speaking countries: INA KERNER, *Postkoloniale Theorien zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2012; MARÍA DO MAR CASTRO VARELA/NIKITA DHAWAN, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung*, Bielefeld 2015; JULIA REUTER/ALEXANDRA KARENTZOS (eds.), *Schlüsselwerke der Postcolonial Studies*, Wiesbaden 2012; JULIA REUTER/PAULA-IRENE VILLA (eds.), *Postkoloniale Soziologie: Empirische Befunde, theoretische Anschlüsse, politische Intervention*, Bielefeld 2010; PETER WEIBEL/SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK (eds.), *Inklusion: Exklusion: Probleme des Postkolonialismus und der globalen Migration*, Wien 2010; cf. also the special issue “Postkolonialismus—und was dann?” of the journal *Interkulturelle Theologie: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* (IKTh 44/2–3 [2019]). On intercultural theology: VOLKER KÜSTER, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, Göttingen 2011; KLAUS HOCK, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, Darmstadt 2011; HENNING WROGEMANN, *Lehrbuch Interkulturelle Theologie/ Missionswissenschaft*, vol. 1–3, Gütersloh 2012/2013/2015. Introduction to the connection of both areas within the framework of a postcolonial theology: ANDREAS NEHRING/SIMON TIELESCH (eds.), *Postkoloniale Theologien: Bibelhermeneutische und kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge*, ReligionsKulturen 11, Stuttgart 2013; SEBASTIAN PITTL (ed.), *Theologie und Postkolonialismus: Ansätze—Herausforderungen—Perspektiven*, Weltkirche und Mission 10, Regensburg 2018; MICHAEL NAUSNER, *Postkoloniale Theologien*, in: VF 57 (2012), 117–130. Especially about Germany: ANDREAS NEHRING/SIMON WIESGICKL (eds.), *Postkoloniale Theologien II: Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum*, Stuttgart 2017; MICHAEL NAUSNER, *Koloniales Erbe und Theologie: Postkoloniale Theorie als Ressource für deutschsprachige Theologie*, in: JUDITH GRUBER (ed.), *Theologie im Cultural Turn: Erkenntnistheologische Erkundungen in einem veränderten Paradigma*, Frankfurt a.M. 2013, 131–150. With regard to the academic reception of postcolonial theories in German-speaking countries, Michael Nausner also names the following persons as “outstanding”: María do Mar Castro Varela, Kien Nghi Ha, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez und Hito Steyerl, cf. MICHAEL NAUSNER, *Die langen Schatten der Nofretete: Postkoloniale Theorie und Theologie in Deutschland*, in: *Conc(D)* 49 (2013), 200–209, 201.208, fn. 5.
- 2 Cf. STEPHEN CASTLES ET AL., *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Basingstoke etc. 2014 [1993], 5.7–8.

of today's migration movements and their considerable economic and social influences on migration societies, it is above all the high domestic and foreign political importance attached to the issue of migration that speaks in favor of such an interpretation of our times. In the course of these developments the right-wing national party spectrum gains influence, while at the same time the media presence of corresponding topics increases.³ On the other hand, civil society initiatives are being formed that combine the theoretical framework of postcolonialism with concrete socio-political concerns—their guiding assumption being that Germany's involvement in the colonial power structures of the past, which has so far hardly been discussed in public, still determines how society confronts the 'foreign' today.⁴

Postcolonial perspectives focus on such established grids of perception and call on us to overcome them. Thus, they can bring us closer to a central aim of intercultural theology, namely to reflect critically on our own location and our essentializing and culturalizing attributions to the seemingly 'other'. Following an historical approach, postcolonial and intercultural perspectives point us to the fact that the worldwide interdependence of different cultures is not a new phenomenon. Thus, they provide access to much-needed historical resources. As the contributions in this volume show, however, postcolonial and intercultural perspectives are relevant to all theological disciplines—beyond what is defined as 'intercultural theology' today. It is time to take these perspectives seriously as an integral part of all theology and to remove the distinction between a kind of theology perceived as 'classical' and other theologies perceived as 'contextual'. Here, biblical plurality of interpretation and the richness of theological thoughts as well as the vitality of religious negotiation processes can be opened up anew.

In some theological thinking representations of the religious 'other' are of special importance, e.g. in theology of religions, certain types of 'contextual' theologies, comparative theology etc. Here, a stance of self-reflexivity needs to be cultivated by theologians. The vantage point theologians happen to have due to biographical reasons cannot just be taken for granted. Otherwise, the power relations, identity constructions, and stereotypes that have a bearing on one's own representation of the 'other' may go unnoticed. Postcolonial critique, with the deconstruction of established orders of meaning and, consequently, also of power structures, at its very heart can provide ample resources for this endeavor.

³ Cf. op.cit., 5–6.

⁴ Cf. Über uns, Website Decolonize Bremen, <https://www.decolonizebremen.com/about> (accessed on 02.05.2019).

Within this context BERNHARD ORTMANN (Yangon/Myanmar) sees potential in the inclusion of subalternized systems of knowledge in comparative approaches to religion. As religious expressions of the subaltern do not fit into categories otherwise often-employed like ‘the world religions’, they reveal the limitations of such highly generalized understandings of the religious ‘other’. Thus, they enable theologians to assess the costs that often come with supposedly useful generalizations. His argument is supported by THERESA PIEPER’s (Bremen) claim that poststructuralist theories of hegemony have much to tell about the way our epistemologies influence our theological reasoning about religious identity. Referring to post-foundationalism, she thus argues for a multi- and interdisciplinary approach to reach a fuller understanding of reality.

The notion that cultures, and consequently also religions, are by no means unrelated entities is another of postcolonialism’s central insights that has great potential for application in theology.⁵ In this regard, Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of a ‘contact zone’ is illuminating. She proposes to consider people as living in “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today”⁶. This is particularly relevant for historical approaches. For any presentation of church or mission history that takes postcolonial critique seriously will have to deal with questions of legitimacy. One of the most important questions of this sort for historians to ask is the following: What other historical narratives are muted by the narrative that I am espousing?

As GLADSON JATHANNA (Chennai/India) points out, such questions are already relevant at the early stage of archival research: if the way in which archivists structure the records gives prominence to those the colonizers and missionaries left behind, it is much easier to construct history from their perspective. Therefore, historians are faced with the challenge to develop methodologies that allow them to also take into account the perspectives of the colonized and other marginalized groups such as women missionaries. This can require historians to explore lesser-known terrains, such as accepting oral histories and works of art as sources that are just as legitimate as archival records. Moreover, as SABINE HÜBNER (Oldenburg) asserts, these challenges, difficult as they are, should not be kept for professional historians alone but be permitted access to university classrooms: for students of church history, mission history, and intercultural theology they present ideal opportunities to

5 In German scholarship, this issue has also been dealt with (outside the field of postcolonialism) by WOLFGANG WELSCH, *Art. Transkulturalität*, in: *EnzPh* 3 (2010), 2771–2777.

6 MARY LOUISE PRATT, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, in: *Profession* 91 (1991), 33–40, 34.

learn how power structures influence the process of historical reconstruction and to develop a stance of self-reflexivity. The complexities of European colonialism with their effects still felt today and with a history that, at least in Germany, is hardly remembered, make this all the more necessary.

As the article of MICHAEL NAUSNER (Uppsala/Sweden) shows, tracing these 'entangled histories' and the resulting interrelations of cultural and religious entities is just as important for our contemporary understanding of society. As our shared common spaces are being shaped more and more by migration and globalization and are becoming increasingly differentiated, to reach a (temporary) consensus on common values and orientations requires constant debate and reformulation. In this endeavor, he argues, the theological notion of being called *out* of this world while still being responsible *for* it could counter nationalist tendencies and mobilize potentials for peace.

Regarding the necessary inclusive nature that such debates should have, DOMINIK GAUTIER'S (Oldenburg) reflections on critical Christologies are helpful. Following Reinhold Niebuhr and James H. Cone, he understands one function of Christology to be the disruption of existing hegemonic orders. He expounds that combined with postcolonial critique, this provides a theological framework within which 'confusion' can become a productive force: the disruption of dominant notions of the self, the world, and of God can facilitate the unlearning of racist thinking and thus work against the epistemic violence that silences the voices of the subaltern.

Representing religious studies and using the example of the theologically controversial Nazareth Baptist Church, South Africa, MAGNUS ECHTLER (Bayreuth) examines such a 'confusing disruption' from a social-anthropological perspective. In order to not suppress the views of ordinary church members, he stipulates the necessity of speaking of the 'Black Messiah' when grappling with the controversial theological question of the messianic character of the church founder Isaiah Shembe and his successors. According to him, one might otherwise repeat the epistemic violence that has characterized both, past attempts of excommunication as well as attempts of canonization.

In the course of the history of exegesis, the adequate methods have always been disputed. However, since the 18th century, the method of historical criticism has been established as the silver bullet of Biblical exegesis. This development took place in Western Europe, so one might suppose that this view of the Biblical text on the one hand mirrors the colonial coinage of the Western society and on the other hand ignores other, non-European perspectives on and methodological approaches to the Bible. For this reason, postcolonial exegetes

demand to “decolonize” Biblical exegesis,⁷ which means to reflect one’s own point of view that is culturally coined. Beside this particular kind of postcolonial approach that questions the methods, postcolonial exegesis can also mean asking historically for the usage of Biblical texts as part of the colonization in the modern period. Moreover, postcolonial exegesis can mean either analyzing those Biblical texts written by the colonizers and oppressors or focusing on those texts written from the perspective of the colonized or marginalized.⁸ In particular the last two options offer the chance to “illuminate shades, hybridities, and hidden forms of resistance”, as Andreas Nehring and Simon Wiesgickl put it.⁹ Based on the observation that the terms ἀγγαρεύειν and μίλιον refer to a Roman military milieu, CHRISTIAN WETZ (Oldenburg) interprets Matt 5:41 in the light of Roman imperialism. He focuses on the relation between the person that needs to be identified as a Roman soldier and the other person the soldier commands to accompany him for a mile. Wetz demonstrates that Jesus’ command to double the mile questions the logic of the Roman empire and puts the soldier and the other person on a par. The verse fits into the context of the Matthean theology of the kingdom of heaven, as not only its redactional embedding in the gospel suggests. JANNEKE STEGEMAN’s (Amsterdam/The Netherlands) contribution is not decidedly exegetical, but rather a sermon analysis. She presents a postcolonial reading of four sermons on Jesus and Tamar (Gen 38). In her analysis, she demonstrates that colonial patterns of interpretation still affect the homiletic reception of the Bible until today. Ignoring his story as a victim of imperial violence, in these sermons Jesus is portrayed as a “white Christ”, whereas Tamar is depicted as “the other” predominantly perceived in a pejorative way.

7 Cf. ANDREAS NEHRING/SIMON WIESGICKL, Postkoloniale Theorien und die Theologie: Themen, Debatten und Forschungsstand zur Einführung, in: IIDEM (eds.), Postkoloniale Theologien II: Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum, Stuttgart 2017, 7–22, 15.

8 Cf. INGEBORG MONGSTAD-KVAMMEN, Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Epistle of James: James 2:1–13 in Its Roman Imperial Context, BiInS 119, Leiden/Boston 2013, 5–6.

9 NEHRING/WIESGICKL, Postkoloniale Theorien, 16 (translation: Britta Konz). It must not be overlooked that a number of Biblical scholars familiar with the postcolonial heuristics notice quite a weak dealing with “classical” exegetical approaches in the works of their postcolonial colleagues. This weakness makes their analyses unnecessarily vulnerable, cf. LUKAS BORMANN, Gibt es eine postkoloniale Theologie des Neuen Testaments?, in: ANDREAS NEHRING/SIMON WIESGICKL (eds.), Postkoloniale Theologien II: Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum, Stuttgart 2017, 186–204, 199: “In postcolonial exegesis, the willingness to participate in exegetical discussions is not so much pronounced” (translation: Christian Wetz). Cf. also MONGSTAD-KVAMMEN, Postcolonial Reading, 7.

Dealing with cultural and religious heterogeneity is ultimately the duty of migration societies, which also needs to be reflected in religious education. So far, there have been discursive intersections within religious education and postcolonial theology, concerning topics such as “tolerance”, “justice” and “anti-hegemony”, but hardly any direct reference to postcolonial theories in the sense of a “conscious transfer of knowledge or methods” has been made.¹⁰ Here, too, postcolonial and intercultural theology is understood more as an additive and not as an integral part of theology that does not have to be considered in all topics. For this reason, as BRITTA KONZ (Dortmund) points out, religious education needs to include not only interreligious learning, but also *intrareligious* learning, where hegemonic structures are uncovered and the worldwide heterogeneity of Christian faith perspectives becomes apparent. The examination of intercultural theology and postcolonial theory can challenge students to reflect comprehensively on the reality of Christian internal differentiation and the cultural diversity of Christianity. Britta Konz shows by means of theologizing how confessional self-understanding can be practiced in religious education that is not based on (intra-)religious othering.

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10 STEFAN SCHOLZ, *Postkoloniales Denken in der Religionspädagogik? Spurensuche—Konvergenzen—Konkretionen*, in: ANDREAS NEHRING/SIMON WIESGICKL (eds.), *Postkoloniale Theologien II: Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum*, Stuttgart 2018, 285–286.

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