
"Decolonization in the World of Christian NGOs": A Theological Response

Charlotte Bray

On January 17, 2024, the Accord Research Alliance Faculty Group organized a webinar to provide a space for discussion on the Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy (CRDA) journal's special issue on decolonization published a few months before in November 2023. The webinar was moderated by Nina Kurlberg, one of two co-editors of the special issue, and started with remarks by two main discussants. This second response is written by Charlotte Bray, who is currently studying anti-racism and power in international development from a Catholic theological perspective at the Lincoln Theological Institute at Manchester University. Believing that our theologies are central to our self-understandings and our actions, for both good and ill, Bray argues that historical Christianity bears much responsibility for the way the Global North skewed power toward themselves, a legacy for which we must account. Working from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching, a rich resource for putting our theology on a more constructive path, she argues that Christians must take advantage of opportunities to make amends and work toward reconciliation in a newly structured anti-racist, decolonized world.

The full recording of the webinar is found at <https://vimeo.com/903813593?share=copy>, and further online discussion on the topic can be accessed at <https://groups.google.com/g/ara-faculty-group-forum>. The special issue of the journal with all the articles is located at <https://crdajournal.org/index.php/crda/issue/view/69>.

Like Mafer, I will start by stating my positionality. I am a White British theologian speaking from the University of Manchester in the UK. I was previously lead trustee for racial justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion at CAFOD, the international development agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, where my role was to accompany CAFOD staff in their task of creating a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization committed to anti-racism. I am now working on a research project at the University of Manchester that explores theological themes in relation to anti-racism work in the sector.¹

In the UK, where I am from, it seems that conversations around decolonizing development have been predominantly happening in "secular" spaces. So, this special edition provides a much-needed space and opportunity for practitioners and academics to explore these issues from an explicitly Christian perspective. It

invites us to ask what it means to be a Christian agency journeying towards anti-racism and decolonization. The articles help drive the conversation forward regarding what a truly anti-racist decolonized sector could look like. They also show what a mammoth task lies ahead as every aspect of an organization's work needs to be critically analyzed through an anti-racist and decolonial lens. For example, as Rebecca Shah demonstrates in her article on decolonizing data, something as commonplace as collecting data for reporting, research, or governance purposes can reinforce harmful power inequities between organizations in the Global North and those from the Global South (Shah 2023). As activist-scholars such as Robtel Neajai Pailey have shown, standard ways of working in the sector can perpetuate the white gaze and foster racist stereotypes that have their origins in coloniality; for example, organizations or individuals from the Global North being regarded as more trustworthy or knowledgeable

¹ To learn more about the research project "Anti-Racism and Power in International Development: A Catholic Theological Approach," please go to the Lincoln Theological Institute's webpage, <http://lincolnthologicalinstitute.com/anti-racism-and-power/> [accessed 20.02.2024].

than organizations or practitioners from the Global South (Pailey 2019). Important questions are raised for anyone involved in the sector, such as – What is expertise and who has it? How do we decide on our measures and models of success? Who has decision-making power and who sets the agenda both for development and decolonization work? Do the narratives organizations tell the world about themselves, their work, and the people they work with perpetuate stereotypes or power inequities? Within the broader task of decolonization, there are a plurality of goods to be achieved and challenges to be overcome. As these authors demonstrate, there is a huge diversity of work and thinking taking place.

I was also struck by how many of the contributors critically examine how power continues to function in their organizations and how they honestly appraise the tensions and challenges they continue to encounter. This sort of honesty, transparency, and accountability is so important to help collectively drive change as it spreads awareness and helps others identify what the barriers to and enablers of this type of work are. The authors do not shy away from speaking of the barriers they face due to being embedded in wider systems, such as those that demand due diligence and reporting in ways that might hinder progress towards decolonization. The authors from Tearfund lead us to question whether new ways of approaching accountability can be explored (Mahdi and Ncube 2023, 28). It is only through such honest accounting of the ways the sector continues to uphold power inequities that historic and contemporary harms can begin to be repaired.

I believe that Christian organizations have an important role to play in the decolonization of both the international development sector and wider society. As theologians such as Willie James Jennings and J. Cameron Carter have shown, distorted Christian beliefs were fundamental in creating and justifying a racial imaginary that perpetuated the power inequities and racial hierarchies that still exist today (Jennings 2010, Carter 2008). Moreover, the international development sector in part grew out of the missionary and so-called “civilizing” work of Christian communities. Many of the theological principles underlying Christian commitments to charity and international development, while seemingly well-intentioned, have historically perpetuated the white gaze and continue to contribute to paternalistic or white savior narratives that cultivate attitudes of pity, saviorism or self-serving benevolence rather than solidarity. There is a need for

Christian communities to account for this legacy of harm.

In their article, Clark Buys and Maria A. Andrade V. assert that, for Christian organizations such as Tearfund, their Christian identity is, in their words, “foundational to the organisation’s why, how, and with whom” (2023, 36). From my experience, for equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and anti-racism efforts to be sustainable and successful within Christian organizations, this work needs to be rooted in their fundamental identity and mission as Christian organizations. The commitment to decolonize needs to come from an organization’s fundamental beliefs and values as these inform the wider culture of an organization. Only in this way will the principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, anti-racism, and decolonization be embedded at every level of the organization. So, it is important for Christian organizations to address the cultural assumptions and norms that guide their work. For example, through what theological lenses do organizations view development or humanitarian work? Where has theology or Church culture perhaps hampered efforts to decolonize? How does theological language function within organizations to either resist or collude with coloniality and racism?

Many of the journal contributors show that, despite this legacy of harm, Christian theology has the potential to disrupt contemporary forms of coloniality and racial hierarchies. It can be used to develop a compelling vision of the sector’s work in ways that lead to specific forms of decolonial and anti-racist praxis. For example, from a Catholic theological perspective, we can start from what the Nigerian theologian Stan Chu Ilo calls “the whole story of the human person” (Ilo 2014, xxxi); that is our origin and destiny in divine love, as all of humanity are lovingly created and redeemed by God. Due to this common origin and destiny, we are called to become a community of kin who love and care for one another as God loves us. The creation and redemption narrative makes clear that God intends for, what Ilo calls, “life in abundance to be received and shared with all” (Ibid., 6). From the perspective of Catholic social teaching, we are all called to participate in this flourishing by mutually sharing our gifts and contributing to the common good.² God calls us to new ways of relating characterized by love, solidarity, mutuality, reciprocity, friendship, and communion.

Sin, however, obstructs this flourishing and abundance of life. Social sin or structural sin is the sin

² See, for example, Pope John Paul II, ‘*Sollicitudo rei socialis*’ (December 30, 1987), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html> [accessed 12 April 2024], §38.

present in social structures that cause harm.³ Decolonization and anti-racism are then about acknowledging and working to transform – and, for those of us who benefit from racial hierarchies and colonial legacies, repent from – those sins of structural racism and coloniality that mitigate against the divine will for the flourishing of all. We cannot build the kingdom of God and fulfill our collective vocation to all participate in bringing about the common good without addressing these sinful structures and legacies and actively working to repair society. Moreover, according to Latin American liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino, social sins blind people caught up within these situations so that those who are privileged are unable to fully recognize the unjust reality as sin, nor do they recognize their personal roles in perpetuating it (Sobrino 2008 and Sobrino 1994). They can only overcome this blindness, and therefore come to truly recognize structural injustice, through listening to the perspectives and lived experiences of communities that are marginalized and oppressed by the prevailing status quo, that is, those communities and individuals engaged in creative practices of survival and resistance against these sinful structures.

For example, without the prophetic condemnations from those of the Global Majority, I, as a privileged white person, would not realize the extent to which coloniality and structural racism infects the sector. For those of us who are privileged, therefore, part of the process of repentance is through centering the lived experiences, voices, and perspectives of people who challenge our dominant ways of thinking and knowing, what decolonial theologian Nicolás Panotto calls the “otherwise thoughts” of “non-hegemonic voices” (Panotto 2019, 218, 221), particularly those from people of the Global Majority. This is why, for those of us who have privilege, our commitments to solidarity must be accompanied by a commitment to subsidiarity, which necessarily includes working to transform the structures that grant us unearned privilege and power in favor of creating a more equitable system. So, from a theological perspective, decolonization and anti-racism can be regarded as both part of our vocation to bring about the common good and as part of our duty to resist the structural sins in history that cause harm.

What I want to end on, though, is that it is important for us to think about decolonization not just

in terms of challenge, but also in terms of opportunity. For example, what new perspectives can we engage with that can transform our normative ways of thinking and working? What alternative pathways for collaboration, partnership, and mutual liberation are there? How can we mutually share capacity and learning to enhance global solidarity and the common good? As Bikita Mahdi and Thobekile Ncube from Tearfund mention in their article, COVID disrupted dominant assumptions about what was possible in the sector (Mahdi and Ncube 2023, 27). It showed that structural and cultural change is possible, even with limited time and resources, if there is the willpower and courage to dare to be different.

References

- Bray, Charlotte. *Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life: Towards a Catholic Theology of Social Sin*. London: T&T Clark, forthcoming.
- Bray, Charlotte Rose. “Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life: Towards a Constructive Development of the Idea of Social Sin within the Catholic Tradition.” Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2022. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/14701/>.
- Buys, Clark and Maria A. Andrade V. 2023. “Abundant Community Theology: A Case Study in Decolonial Theological Research.” *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 5 (1): 35-45.
- Carter, J. Kameron. 2008. *Race: A Theological Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ilo, Stan Chu. 2014. *The Church and Development in Africa: Aid and Development from the Perspective of Catholic Social Ethics*, African Christian Studies Series 2. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.
- Jennings, Willie James. 2010. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mahdi, Bikita and Thobekile Ncube, et al. 2023. “Tearfund’s Decolonisation Journey—from Jubilee to the Present.” *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 5(1): 19-29.
- Pailey, Robtel Neajai. 2019. “De-centring the ‘White Gaze’ of Development.” *Development and Change* 51(3): 729-745. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12550>>.

³ I have elsewhere constructively developed the idea of social sin in dialogue with Catholic social teaching and liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino. For a fuller treatment of theologies of social sin within the Catholic tradition, including that propounded by Jon Sobrino, please see Charlotte Bray, *Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life: Towards a Catholic Theology of Social Sin* (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming). See also Charlotte Rose Bray, “Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life: Towards a Constructive Development of the Idea of Social Sin within the Catholic Tradition” (doctoral thesis, Durham University 2022). Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/14701/>.

- Panotto, Nicolás. 2019. "A Critique of the Coloniality of Theological Knowledge: Rereading Latin American Liberation Theology as Thinking Otherwise." In *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives*, edited by R. Barreto and R. Sirvent, 217-237. Springer Verlag.
- Pope John Paul II. "Sollicitudo rei socialis." December 30, 1987. Available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html> [accessed 12 April 2024], §38.
- Shah, Rebecca Supriya. 2023. "Decolonizing Data and Recovering the Person in Christian Relief and Development Organizations." *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 5(1): 55-71.
- Sobrino, Jon. 2008. *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Sobrino, Jon. 1994. *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Charlotte Bray is currently engaged in postdoctoral research on anti-racism and power in international development from a Catholic theological perspective at the Lincoln Theological Institute at Manchester University.

Author email: charlotte.bray@manchester.ac.uk.
