
Further Discussion on Decolonization

Moderated by Nina Kurlberg, with Contributions from Bikita Mahdi, Thobes Ncube, Liz Muir, Rebecca Shah, Alfred Sebahane, Clark Buys, and Emma Smith Cain.

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, Mafer Madriz, director of Compassion International's partnership efforts focused on mobilizing and strengthening the capacity of local church partners, and Charlotte Bray, currently studying anti-racism and power in international development from a Catholic theological perspective at the Lincoln Theological Institute at Manchester University. These two responses were followed by a discussion that included insights from the authors of four of the journal articles: Bikita Mahdi and Thobekile Ncube, Rebecca Supriya Shaw, Clark Buys, and Emma Smith Cain. This third response is a collation of these insights, along with additional brief comments from Liz Muir and Alfred Sebahane.

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>.

Bikita Mahdi

We all know, from the outset, that we can't undo in a few years what has taken centuries to ingrain. We are grateful that the build up to Tearfund's Jubilee year in 2018 allowed us to pause as an organization to lay the foundation for a spiritual shift to happen, a deliberate path towards healing by rebalancing power and restoring relationships. We must apply to ourselves the same underlying theology of restoration of broken relationships that we believe can help end poverty and injustice. But the path is not always easy. Obviously, we were operating in a funding environment that's more restricted than ever. Protecting investment in translation budgets, for example, investment in relationships built on allyship and friendship and not money, and building equity, diversity, and inclusion considerations into all our processes, resources, and tools. These all take effort, resources, and energy. In an era of shrinking, unrestricted budgets, these things can be very hard and present us with some real practical considerations and obstacles.

Thobes Ncube

I will add one thing. There is the financial cost, but there is also the emotional toil that happens when you go on this journey, because there is a lot of letting go of ways of thinking, there is a lot of giving up power, there is a lot of receiving power. And it can be quite costly. Sometimes that can be a barrier because it is too much. And then there can be a temptation to put a pause on it when it gets to be too much, whether it is on the well-being of staff or the financial cost that comes with it. In spite of all this, the journey is worth it.

Liz Muir

In relation to the cost, the question organizations must really ask themselves is whether they are prepared for the cost. One, in terms of power; two, in terms of budget. And if they are not, they must think about the cost to the people who suffer if we do not decolonize. There are two different angles we must face when thinking about cost, because there is a great cost to humans, to our workforces, to individuals when we do

not do this well. If we are going to say that we are going to do it, we really must back it, because if we do not it becomes a burden to people, which impacts well-being and performance, among other things.

Moderator Nina Kurlberg then asked author Rebecca Supriya Shah about her focus on data collection, especially as it relates to monitoring and evaluation, which Rebecca addresses in her contribution. Are standard evaluation methods appropriate in a decolonized world, or should Christian organizations change how they approach data, data gathering, and program evaluation?

Rebecca Shah

To answer that question is very difficult. So let me do what most self-seeking authors do and point you to my paper to read it. In the meantime, I just want to raise a couple of points. The first way in which Christian organizations can effectively seek to decolonize, and might I even say “deWesternize,” their practices is to avoid predatory extractive practices of data collection and abstract digitized quantification. How do they do that? As I mention in my paper, it is by seeking informed consent. You may say, of course, everyone seeks informed consent, but many Christian organizations, unlike universities that conduct research, aren’t governed by the kind of internal review boards (IRBs) that I was governed by when I do research, where they ask you many questions about the type of research you are doing. So seeking informed consent is important.

The second one, and this is where I think the rubber hits the road, is for Christian organizations to avoid paternalistic framing of their effort because they are the only ones who know best and because they happen to have the resources and skills to engage in the kind of data collection and analysis required. Of course, the answer always is “but we will do capacity building.” That’s how they “fix” the Global South. Capacity building is all well and good. There are problems with it, but my issue here is that much of the power imbalance lies in the structural issues and inequities inherent in grant making. If you were to ever apply for a grant in the U.S., at the Department of Health and Human Services for Religious Freedom, to the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the John Templeton Foundation, or the Templeton Religion Trust, as I have done on numerous occasions, you would discover that it is an onerous process. You need to have experts. There are pages and pages and pages one fills out. Do local agencies and independent local actors have these opportunities? Most do not. So this becomes a monopoly of large-scale Christian organizations like World Vision and Tearfund, and the whole way of

understanding how grants are given, how grants are constructed, is itself a structural imbalance and a power issue.

Finally, the methods used are very important, because the kinds of methods that create distance, the categories used, for example that they are “oppressed,” or “she was abused,” a “victim,” these all distance the data-gatherer from the person whose data is being collected. The second way the methods are problematic is that they have become so large-scale and digital that they are impersonal, and people really don’t have a chance to provide their own voice and their own perspective. I suggest an alternative to such methods. I have used large-scale methods and I have worked on monitoring and evaluation, and I do not for a moment think this is an easy thing. Forgive me if I have conveyed this.

Finally, and this is a deep problem, large-scale Christian organizations, northern Christian organizations, and their counterparts in the Global South have discussions that disparage certain aspects of culture, reinforce Western cultural imperialism, and sustain a false narrative about the purity of Western Christian culture. I did a large-scale evaluation for a large Christian organization based here in the United States, which was looking at how biblical principles can foster human flourishing. And one of the things to talk about was witchcraft in Africa; a quick aside from the fact that I am not for one moment advocating witchcraft and terrible things in indigenous cultural practices that need to be avoided. But this organization went and started discussing the baobab tree and how it was evil and how people ought to stop protecting it, because if they did, they would flourish. This is a problem, because these discussions are cultural, and they are often pejorative. One has to do it, these organizations and people tell me, because their donors demand it. But to deWesternize and decolonize research, Christian organizations should not start from a default posture of hostility or skepticism towards traditional culture, and particularly cultural practices. They should recognize that, more often than not, there is value in protecting and preserving cultural values and traditions such as those aspects that support marriage, marital stability, family life, and domestic harmony.

Alfred Sebahene

Alfred Sebahene speaking from Tanzania. I’m not actually responding to the question, but I want to make a small contribution that might help us think more broadly when we talk about decolonization. My worry is that in most of the writings we come across today, including some of the writings we ourselves have done, the agenda on decolonization is mainly based on theories, arguments, history, a bit of practice, and trying to see whether we can have good practice. And we are

missing out, because I don't see much on the role of the gospel in our discussions. If you come to talk about decolonization in the Global South, in particular in my area of East Africa, you need to mention what the Bible says, and how we respond to the power of the gospel as we speak about decolonization. I challenge us to think about this. Finally, it is a bit trickier when we keep talking about Global South whenever we talk about decolonization. Decolonization is not about Global South and Global North. It has to do with the transformation by the power of the gospel, and on both sides, involving all practitioners. If people are transformed, then they would know what to do with the grants. The need to think about the power of the gospel is very, very important.

Moderator Nina Kurlberg took this opportunity to focus again on the theological, especially the theologies that underpin and motivate Christian organizations. Clark Buys of Tearfund and Maria Andrade wrote an article for the special issue that explained the theological research process Tearfund engaged in on environmental and economic sustainability. She asked Clark why they believe Christian organizations must decolonize their theology, and why such decolonial theologies are relevant for Christian NGOs.

Clark Buys

To some it might sound quite abstract to talk about theologies of Christian NGOs. Does it really matter thinking about such abstract concepts? In fact, yes, there are profound and significant implications for our impact both on people and on planet. Our case study contribution explores the research methodology of some of our theological research around economic and environmental sustainability and of our research consultations in various contexts around the world. The research kept unearthing a recurring issue we were faced with, which is the issue of dominion theology. This perspective is rooted in an interpretation of Genesis 1 that proposes that Christians are not only sort of invited, but also obligated and responsible in some sense, to dominate and control all of creation in a self-seeking way. Of course, this is incredibly concerning, and the application of this theology has been devastating in all sorts of ways. But there is for me an unexpected sort of encouragement and reminder here. Dominion theology serves as a reminder of the tangible connection between theology, action, and the resulting impact on the world. Theology is not merely an intellectual exercise. It carries the potential to shape and influence our actions, which in turn shape the world. My first point, then, is that theology matters for Christian NGOs because of the way theology concretely impacts people and planet.

Second, it is important to scrutinize the voices that shape our theology. As has been said in different ways already, too often, and in many contexts, the voices influencing our theology so disproportionately represent the Global North, people who are White, English-speaking people, often men. This imbalance in representation perpetuates the biases within our theology, which then impact the actions that stem from it. For Tearfund, a UK-based NGO serving economically impoverished communities in the Global South, this has become a critical concern. Our fundraising primarily occurs in the UK, and it is essential that our theology is not only inclusive, but also reflective of the voices of the economically marginalized. One of the great gifts to the world from Latin American liberation theology is the way it underscores the necessity of including the voices of the marginalized, of the economically impoverished, of the “poor” in shaping our theologies, and at times lies in intentionally decolonizing theology and ensuring that the voices we elevate are diverse, thus breaking away from historical biases that have shaped our theologies.

Lastly, we must acknowledge the historical legacy of colonialism, a legacy in which colonial Christianity has sadly played a significant part, as Charlotte mentioned earlier. Crafting theology within the historical context demands recognition and accountability. Decolonizing our theology is not just about inclusivity, as important as that is. It is about seeking as best we can to move towards actively dismantling the power and wealth inequalities that colonial theologies have entrenched and created around the world.

So, three quick points to try and answer the question. First, it is important because theology impacts action, which has an impact on people and planet. Second, decolonizing our theology needs to include the hard work to further diversify the voices that shape our theology, not least of which are the voices of the economically poor. And third, we are working not in the context of a historic vacuum, but within the historical legacy of colonialism, which means we must actively seek to dismantle the systems of power and wealth inequality established through colonialism. I hope those quick thoughts are helpful and stimulating.

To close the webinar, **the moderator** asked Emma Smith Cain, who co-wrote a contribution with Alan Epp Weaver on the Mennonite Central Committee's experience of decolonizing aid, to review key practical tools or approaches organizations can turn to in order to address decolonization.

Emma Smith Cain

In terms of what we find at MCC to be practical tools or approaches, MCC functions primarily as a

funding agency. We accompany our partners in long, long, long-term relationships in 45-plus countries globally. The most important aspect of this relationship is the focus on accompaniment and mutual transformation. You will see that come out clearly in the article about MCC and ANADESA, one of the partners in Guatemala that Mafer talked about; you will see this practice of accompaniment, but also the focus on mutual transformation come out quite clearly in that article.

One thing that Alain Epp Weaver and I highlighted is just the tension related to evidencing our global impact. I'm not going to talk about the challenges of that in the formal part of this webinar, but that is one of the biggest challenges we face. There are practical ways that MCC has been able to address that. Some of you might be involved in similar conversations happening in more secular spaces like InterAction. About five or six years ago, InterAction commissioned a report that showed that evidencing global impact is highly problematic on one end and nearly impossible on the other end. At MCC we have really resisted the urge to try to aggregate global impact in terms of outcome indicators, because when we try to say, okay, here is the percent decrease in global hunger directly attributed to the work of MCC and its partners, that forces us to dictate to our partners the indicators they must use. I think Rebecca would also agree with us that this devolves into an extractive process of gathering data in the Global South for the benefit of us in the Global North, and particularly for funding agencies like USAID, or charity-rating agencies, like Charity Navigator here in the US or Charity Intelligence in Canada. Ultimately, what does that show? At MCC, we really try to value the relationships with our partners over logframe data. Part of that for us is making sure that even though we do have standardized tools, these tools are flexible. If a partner says that this logframe tool does not work for them and they do not want to use it, that is totally fine. We can adapt our practices to share the evaluation data plans in a format that works for that partner.

Something inspiring and innovative I saw recently with our Zimbabwe program, is a partner who said, "you know, writing these reports semi-annually is such a drain on our time and is not how we normally convey the results of our work." Instead, they submitted a video report where they shared verbally the types of changes they had seen in their communities. Being open and flexible to using reporting formats, logframe tools, and planning tools that really fit with the partner's priorities is important to us at MCC, while simultaneously resisting that urge and that pressure to demonstrate global evidence of impact and instead relying on qualitative case studies to drill down deep into what that work looks like globally.

Clark Buys is a Theology Development Officer at Tearfund. Clark leads Tearfund's global Young Theologian.

Emma Smith Cain is Learning & Evaluation Coordinator at Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania, United States. Smith Cain is also a 2023-2024 Accord Fellow.

Nina Kurlberg is postdoctoral research associate in theological education at the University of Durham, UK. She served as guest editor for the journal's special issue on decolonisation.

Bikita Mahdi is a business analyst and horizon scanner in Tearfund's Strategy & Impact team working on a wide range of corporate projects.

Liz Muir is Head of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at Tearfund, with responsibility for embedding effective change management and inclusion across the organization globally. Liz is an experienced trustee with experience across the public, education, and charity sectors.

Thobekile Ncube is an organisation development manager at Tearfund Zimbabwe.

Alfred Sebahene is Senior Priest and Canon Theologian in the Anglican Church of Tanzania. He serves as Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at St John's University of Tanzania in Dodoma, where he also coordinates the Unit for the Study of Corruption.

Rebecca Supriya Shah is Special Advisor to the President for Global Initiatives at the University of Dallas, and principal investigator for the Religion and Economic Empowerment Project (REEP). Based in Bangalore, India, and Washington, DC, Shah consults with international organizations, and governments on development policy and practice.

Author emails:

Clark Buys: clarkbuys@gmail.com

Emma Smith Cain: emmasmithcain@mcc.org

Nina Kurlberg: nina.kurlberg@durham.ac.uk

Alfred Sebahene: asebahene@sjut.ac.tz

Rebecca Sjpriya Shah: rshah2@udallas.edu
