ESSAY

Decolonization and the Sociology of Christianity

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The contemporary focus on racial injustice includes not only debate over racialized violence and inequality, but also debate over the historical and social systems implicated in racial injustice. This includes the legacy of colonialism evident, for example, in calls to remove memorials to slave-owners and colonial tyrants from churches (Burgess 2020), but also in calls to decolonize universities and academic disciplines. This debate has intensified in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter movement, itself more recently and partly inspired by the global Fallist movement, initiated at the University of Cape Town in 2015 as the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. That campaign toppled the statue of the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes and initiated numerous reforms to South African higher education. Assessing Fallist demands for decolonization, the South African educationalist Jonathan Jansen wrote that, "as with any social science construct, there is no singular or fixed meaning of the term, and the best one can do is try to make sense of decolonization within the contexts in which the word is used" (2017:156).

All approaches to decolonizing the university and academic life recognize European colonialism has shaped academia, including curricula, research, employment, and management. All approaches similarly share a recognition that colonialism continues to shape academia in explicit and implicit ways. However, approaches differ greatly on the degree of autonomy from cultural and historical forces granted to academics, on appropriate remedies and reforms, and on the political languages and ideologies of decolonial practice.

Reflecting on the question of the decolonization of the sociology of Christianity from my perspective as an Australian sociologist studying Christianity in South Africa for the last seven years, a period which overlaps Fallism, this essay will advance a relatively modest approach to decolonization; rather than Fallism, this approach might be labelled "glass-half-fullism." Examining normative sociological ethics and reflexivity, this essay will argue that much of what goes on in the name of decolonizing academia, specifically decolonizing research, is already established best practice within the social sciences, and embedded within everyday research cultures, without being specifically identified as "decolonial."

In contrast to my approach, in some cases it can appear that decolonization has become a catchall for everything one dislikes about today's university. Achille Mbembe (2015), the most prominent contemporary theorist of postcolonial Africa, managed to link the drudgery of administration into the debate about decolonizing South African universities; a decolonized university has less paperwork and fewer committee meetings—who would not say "amen" to

that! As humorous or opportunistic as this may seem, if one argues that the contemporary university is the product of a world fashioned by European colonialism, then every quotidian practice becomes debatable in decolonization discourse, which in turn may become a totalizing critique of cultural and intellectual life. This is especially the case when universities are viewed from the perspective of students who may not see themselves represented in institutional culture, not merely in the curricula—the issues and individuals deemed worthwhile studying— but everyday university life, including the art hanging on the walls. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Max Price, admitted his university created "an environment which does communicate that the colour of excellence is white" (Jansen 2017:56).

Approaches to decolonizing universities are extremely diverse, even within the single South African context. At one end of the continuum lie quite practical plans for restructuring universities around the fact that the typical student is now black, working-class, and the first in their family to attend university, in other words, individuals whose "collective 'genealogy' has been one of oppression and subordination" (Lange 2017:49). This may necessitate complex student support systems, transforming universities into miniature welfare states (Jansen 2017:176-183), challenging the notion of universities as bourgeois communities of scholars. At the other end of the spectrum are theory-driven decolonized epistemological approaches, displacing or replacing Western scholarship and scientific methodologies with traditional African philosophies or radical Afrocentric ideologies (Msila and Gumbo 2016). Somewhere in the middle lie approaches to decolonization that take an inclusive and pluralistic approach to non-Western ways of knowing, as well as critical approaches to academic norms and traditions, interrogating ways in which academic intuitions and cultures have been complicit in injustice (Jansen 2017:160-162).

My approach is in accord with this notion of decolonization as critical interrogation, and I am rather positive about the possibilities of developing or identifying decolonizing perspectives within sociological practice. Representative of my glass-half-fullism, we can reframe the influential Maori social scientist Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012:167) observation that "[i]t was not really until the 1960s that critical theory took hold as a theory for research," and recognize that critical and reflexive methodological practices and debates have been ongoing in the social sciences for at least half a century. Within sociology and various area studies programs, including African studies, the anti-Vietnam war movement in the United States, overlapping with the civil rights movement, motivated radical disciplinary introspection (Bryceson 2012, Smith 2012). Around the same time, the anthropologist Laura Nader (1972) told her colleagues to study "up," by using anthropology to de-familiarize Western society. For example, why are cultures of poverty the problem, rather than cultures of affluence? It is my argument that many decolonial practices can build upon these critical practices.

In shaping this essay, I am aware, as we are all now aware, that I write and research from *somewhere*, rather than that ontological space once occupied by affluent, white, male

social scientists known as *nowhere*. Social scientific research, decolonized or otherwise, is shaped by a variety of personal and political interests. As a non-indigenous Australian, I am aware that my approach to this matter differs significantly from some indigenous Australian scholars with whom I engage as colleagues in everyday professional life, as well as some African scholars with whom I engage as colleagues in my research and writing. I am similarly aware that my own political commitments to multiculturalism and social democracy can complement, but ultimately contradict, certain indigenous political desires. As Malory Nye (2019:9) italicizes, "*decolonization is not a metaphor*," and for many indigenous scholars, decolonizing academia is inseparable from issues of land ownership and political sovereignty.

Illustrative of the necessity of maintaining awareness of one's positionality and perspective, and of being open to having that position and perspective challenged, I recall speaking with a minister and a group of theology students about the Sermon on the Mount during fieldwork in South Africa several years ago. Having lived in several peaceful and prosperous societies—Australia, Britain, and Finland—I said I never felt moved by the injunction to "love your enemies," because the most I have experienced are irritants—telemarketers or populist politicians—not enemies. Some of the students, highly valuing South Africa's multiracial, social democratic compromise, agreed for more serious reasons. Enmity was a harsh word to invoke, and certainly not a relationship one should lightly admit. "But might not someone consider *you* to be *their* enemy?" the minister asked me, implying that I should not focus on finding myself as a righteous victim within the verse (Mt 5:44), or the world. This is of course the case, and just as institutions that present themselves as resources for empowerment can be the opposite, scholars considering themselves culturally sensitive and politically progressive can be insensitive to the interests of others at different times or viewed from a different perspective.

In arguing that decolonization can be an extension of existing good academic practices rather than a repudiation of academia, I am close to what Jansen (2017:161) calls "decolonization as critical interrogation of settled knowledge," and against what he and others have called maximalist or "hard" decolonization. But I would further suggest that critical practice is, in fact, "settled knowledge." Malory Nye (2019) offers the most engaged and extensive hard/maximalist approach to decolonizing the study of religion. Acknowledging that if the "study of religion was effectively decolonized, then possibly there would be very little left standing of the current discipline," Nye is nevertheless inclined to answer affirmatively to whether or not "the study of religion is so deeply the product of colonialism, that its structures, presumptions, and methods are irredeemably flawed? Is the study of religion a rotten fruit of the *poisoned tree* of colonialism" (2019:1-2)?

However, to make this maximalist argument for decolonization work, one must overlook the training of several generations of social scientists. Nye (2019:18-20) revealingly focuses more upon Durkheim's century-old "armchair anthropology" in *The Elementary Forms of*

Religious Life (1995) than upon contemporary research practices. Reading Nye's important essay, I can recognize my broad discipline, but I cannot recognize my research practices, which I take to be relatively typical among qualitative sociologists in general and sociologists of Christianity in particular. This is not least because the issues Nye raises are ubiquitous in conferences, publications, and teaching. If we think about two integral practices in sociology— tellingly obligatory in every dissertation—we can see what has actually been going on in recent decades. A quick refresher course on (i) research ethics, and (ii) scholarly reflexivity, should demonstrate how these practices conceivably underlabor decolonization, or suggest decolonial possibilities, in both the official practice and the "ordinary ethics" of academia (Das 2012), the practices and discourse of academics going about our banal business.

Research ethics are practices of principled sensitivity to the rights of others; they are both abstract and applied, codified and evolving (Iphohen 2009), and they oblige researchers to consider their situation in relation to multiple stakeholders. Every sociologist who has lectured on research ethics will have taught something along the lines of ethical research requiring a commitment to respect, beneficence, and justice. These are the three principles of the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979) that has underpinned research ethics in the United States and elsewhere, as much as sociologists are wont to grumble about its clinical focus. Even though there are more specialized and applied protocols from governments, professions, disciplines, and increasingly from indigenous communities (Smith 2012:124), the Belmont Report remains a familiar touchstone.

Item one, respect for autonomy, is primarily concerned with consent, but items two and three are closely related and concerned with avoiding exploitation of research participants and communities. Taken together, they lessen item one's individualism, which is important in cultures in which rights do not only adhere in individuals. These three foundational guidelines go some way toward allowing researchers to answer the questions conceivably asked of outsider researchers; "What knowledge will the community gain from this study? … What are some likely positive outcomes from this study? ... To whom is the researcher accountable?" (Smith 2012:175-176). The *Belmont Report* emerged from the notorious Tuskegee Syphilis Study in which rural African American men were denied medical treatment in order to chart the progress of the disease. The approach was laden with racial inequality; participants were treated as expendable, and they and their communities were excluded from the greater good researchers claimed to serve.

The power of researchers has now changed, and we have no privileged detachment from society and no right to non-consensual interference in people's lives in the name of science. The practices of sociologists in the past astonish my students of today, and, perhaps perversely, "ethical scandals" is one of my favorite topics to teach. Writing in the wake of the global financial crisis, Ron Iphofen (2009:2) argued that all professions are now under "moral

suspicion," and while the absence of trust in expertise is a serious issue, especially during a pandemic or a climate crisis, at least one sociological paradigm, Ulrich Beck's influential theory of the risk society, sees its democratic potentialities (Beck 1992).

Of course, research ethics protocols remain imperfect. Angela Last argues that despite increasing intuitional scrutiny from review boards, funding bodies, and communities themselves, some research projects "only fulfil 'fairness criteria' on paper" (2018:216). They continue to reflect colonially influenced inequalities, with academic agendas being disproportionately shaped by the interests and ambitions of academics at wealthy, research-driven universities in the Global North. Literary scholar Gillian Whitlock refers to this as Indiana Jones-style "raiding" of culture, flying in and out of a research site, and searching for data to confirm theories developed elsewhere, while engaging little with local scholarship and intellectual life (1996:68-69). However, pragmatically (and confessionally) speaking, short-term research of this kind also reflects the reality of academic life, even at aforementioned wealthy, research-driven universities. The increasingly project-based nature of research and the precarious nature of academic employment can undermine any long-term commitments scholars might wish to make to particular communities.

In addition to research ethics, scholarly reflexivity is also an essential aspect of contemporary sociological education and practice. So much so that Ghassan Hage jokes about the postmodern anthropologist who told his informant, "enough about you, let's talk about me" (2009:61-62). Reflexive research means turning our critical faculties back on ourselves, thinking about ourselves as positioned in a particular way in the world, and realizing that we exist in relation to other stakeholders. If we think about the ordinary ethics of social scientists—the conversations at conferences, and in classrooms and staffrooms—reflexivity is a recognizably constant process and arguably a contemporary *attitude* towards academic life, whereby researchers reflect on their knowledge at the same time that they produce knowledge, and expect their peers to do the same. Practicing reflexivity includes awareness of the origins of our disciplines, and what David Hufford (1999) calls our "occupational ideologies" which can pass by as common sense. Nye argues that "decolonization requires scholars to recognize their own structural location within disciplinary history" (2019:5), which in turn requires a recognition of anthropology's connection with colonial practices, or sociology's engagement in Othering regional communities, and so on. I would suggest, in my glass-half-fullist approach, that reflexive practice is also a part of sociology's disciplinary history. While one finds Max Weber (1949) practicing the value-free sociology he preached, "more in the breach than in the observance" (Allen 2017:4-5), his essays on ethics and objectivity, written in the first decades of the 20th century, at least ensured later generations of sociologists would have a foundational methodological discourse to debate within and against.

Moreover, one should not underestimate just how much broader debate around disciplinary history and ideology has already taken place. For example, the sociologist Susan

Harding (1991) and the anthropologist Joel Robbins (2003) have critiqued sociology and anthropology's constructions of secular subjectivities. In her oft-cited article "Representing Fundamentalism," Harding (1991) critiques the construction of evangelicals as "repugnant cultural others" who flout ideological sociological assumptions about modernization and secularization in the Global North. Robbins (2003:193) applies and extends Harding's critique to anthropology, arguing that Christianity is too close but too far from normatively secular social scientific practices to be theorized conventionally. Whereas some forms of Christianity can be culturally relativized away, especially for scholars from the Global North studying Christianity in the Global South, the universal claims of the Christian-next-door, who implicitly ought to know better, unsettles "the fundamental schemes by which the discipline organizes the world into the familiar and the foreign" (Robbins 2013:193). Decolonial scholarship also has its own ideological norms. For example, the presentation of Christianity as pure cultural negativity in Smith's (2012) study, rather than as a diverse and contested tradition of profound significance to millions of indigenous people, especially across the Pacific, fails to interrogate the essentializing tendencies of some decolonial discourses.

As within other social scientific disciplines, area studies—here African studies—has also experienced decades of "epistemological angst" around the question of the construction of scholarly knowledge (Bundy 2002:65). As an anonymous peer reviewer commented on my book proposal about middle-class Christians in South Africa (Abraham 2021), "If the author fails to be explicit and reflexive ... about his own positionality as a researcher, the book will likely simply be ignored by some potential readers." Fair enough. However, whatever one wishes to accuse scholars of the Global North of, one can lay many of the same criticisms on African-based scholars as well. As Amina Mama (2007) demonstrates, African scholars have also been complicit with oppressive systems in what is likely a constant temptation of every profession, especially those such as academia disproportionately dependent upon public funding.

This short essay has argued that debates over decolonizing academia, seeking to undo the impact of European colonialism over every facet of the university, particularly research, are worthwhile debates. It was also argued that proximate critical practices have nevertheless been ongoing for some decades, overlapping, *inter alia*, with the critiques of normative disciplinary secularity offered by Hufford, Harding, and Robbins, as noted above. Focusing on sociology's normative ethical protocols and scholarly reflexivity, emerging *against* racist research scandals such as the Tuskegee experiment, it was argued that sociology's ordinary ethics evince values compatible with certain decolonial practices.

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