

## **Embracing Postcolonialism: The Future of Christian Education**

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**Abstract:** The field of Christian education is changing due to globalization and contextualization of society, particular as it relates to the ethnic demographics of the church. While much of the research and leadership in evangelical theology has historically been dominated by white males from the West, the field of postcolonial theologies and hermeneutics has implications for the church and the future of the field of Christian education. This article provides an overview of postcolonial studies (liberation theologies, feminist theology, and biblical hermeneutics) and how they have changed the scope of theological and biblical studies. Then the article gives focus to the impact of postcolonial studies on the field of Christian Education by sketching out a way forward for future studies in Christian education.

### **Introduction**

The field of Christian education is changing due to globalization and contextualization of society and the church. Often the approach to contextualization has been highly influenced by a Western understanding of Scripture and theology, which has been based on more historical and critical approach to biblical interpretation. In more recent years, the fields of biblical studies and theology has addressed these concerns by interpreting Scripture and theology within a particular context (Adams, 2006). Postcolonialism is a hermeneutical process that is a “critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between idea and power, which lies behind Western theories of learning” (Sugirtharajah, 2003, p. 15). Postcolonial studies are an attempt to address the lopsided and inadequacies of the dominate systems of thought, socially, biblically, and theologically. Postcolonial studies provide Christian educators with an awareness that there are voices, particularly ethnic and feminine voices that need to be heard.

While the field of Christian education has seen an increase in research and writing by women and persons of color, the field still struggles with giving particular attention to postcolonial approaches in fear that it erodes the normative authority of Scripture. Many Christian educators may find this article to be counter to their particular Evangelical understating of scripture, and may find the thesis of the article difficult to embrace. However, as the article indicates, consideration needs to be given to the impact of postcolonial studies in the field of Christian education. Also, while postcolonial interpretation of Scripture and theology are debatable, the importance of liberation theology, feminist theology, and postmodern biblical interpretation has implication for Christian education. The Religious Education Association, an international multi-faith organization has addressed these issues (Seymour & Miller, 1990; Miller, 1995; Thompson, 1992). The REA has maintained a balance between identity formation, impacted by postcolonial perspectives, while upholding a particular Christian tradition (Seymour 2013, p. 7). The work being done in the field of religious education; particularly Christian religious education could provide areas of engagement for those is the field of Christian education.

The importance of post-colonial studies has been even more relevant today with the racial struggles that are manifested globally, and more recently in North America through the Black Lives Matters movement, Ferguson, Missouri, immigration (Deferred Action for Childhood

Arrivals), and the Me-Too Movement. Regardless of whether a person agrees or disagrees with all aspects of these movements, they reflect the pain of minorities who have been disempowered and oppressed, particularly by a Western white male dominated culture. While one may not see the implications of these cultural realities to Christian education, they do have implications for the way Scripture and theology is interpreted and practiced.

This article provides an overview of postcolonial studies (liberation theologies, feminist theology, and biblical hermeneutics) and how they have changed the scope of theological and biblical studies. Then the article gives focus to the impact of postcolonial studies on the field of Christian Education by sketching out a way forward for future studies in Christian education.

### **Postcolonialism**

Postcolonialism or postcolonial theory is concerned with issues of race, diaspora, and identity. While the term has been most associated with those who have experienced colonization in the Global South, it can be applied more broadly to include situations where one group has been colonized (exploited) by another (English 2009, p. 117). Postcolonial studies are related to the dissolution of the European empires in the wake of World War II and the widespread achievement of independence on the part of the former colonies that the term “postcolonial” was first coined. It can also include the native and invader societies and cultures, wrestling with the questions of identity and representation in a new cultural context.

Postcolonial theology and biblical studies has emerged over the last fifty years to give focus to deconstruct the oppressive nature of the monolithic approaches to Christian belief and practice. Postcolonial theology questions and critiques structures of power, dominate systems, and embedded ideologies in order to suggest social transformation that recognize and validate the perspectives of marginalized peoples, cultures, and identities. In other words, the goal of postcolonial theology is to give equal voices to oppressed and marginalized identities. An example of this is feminist theology that seeks to see the Bible and theory through the eyes of women, and Latino/a theology seeks to see through the eyes of Latinos/as within his or her own context (Gutiérrez, 1988).

### **Liberation Theology**

Gustavo Gutiérrez is known as the father of liberation theology. Gutiérrez, while educated in Europe, recognized what was needed in Latin America was a decolonized theological project that reflected the realities of indigenous Latin America experience (Dorrien 2008, p. 103). Liberation theology integrates theology with socio-political concerns emerging from historical contexts of injustice, oppression, and massive human suffering (Schipani 1995, p. 288-89). It is a new way of doing theology, often defined as “critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word” (Gutiérrez 1988, p. xxxiii, 32). As Daniel Schipani states, “by sponsoring active solidarity with the poor and oppressed, liberation theology advocates a radical model involving costly discipleship including the practical social and political implications of following and discerning the way of Jesus Christ in the real world in which we live (1995, p. 288). This type of theology is “theology from below,” or inductive theology as compared to deductive theology. In other words, instead of theology beginning with rational principles, doctrines, or articles of faith and applying them to experience. Liberation theology starts with the “here and now” of experience, and then develops theological principles to be applied.

Liberation theology represents post-colonial studies by focusing on the context as the place where theology is done by the interpreters in his or her context. The thesis of Orlando Espín edited book, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology* is theologies done latinamente or “preferential option for culture” (2016, p. 17). As Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández states, “to do theology latinamente entails an intentional mapping of the theologian’s location in relation to the slices of the daily being explored and the communities to whom one is accountable. Presumptions of objectivity dismissed as biases and preferences of being implicated are critically taken into account and identified” (Nanko-Fernández 2015, p. 16). Latino/a theology gives preference for those who are poor and marginalized which represents the nature of God. Thus, God advocates and favors the poor and oppressed.

While liberation theology has been embraced more broadly it has been critiqued by evangelicals on many levels. Robert Pazmiño (1988, p. 70-77) indicates that the benefits of liberation theology for Christian educators is its commitment to social issues, justice, and social sins which are needed corrections to evangelical theology. He states that the “God of the Bible is a God of liberation who bring full liberation in the person and work of Jesus Christ” (1988, p. 77). While Pazmiño illustrates the benefits of liberation theology, he also provides a variety of cautions for those who espouse support its tenets. For example, his critique is based on a Reformed theological perspective that a preoccupation of a person’s contextual can result in not adequately addresses the biblical sources of the Christian faith (Pazmiño 1988, 76).

### *Theological Education*

Twenty years ago, Maria Harris indicated that while some strides had been made regarding ethnic diversity, particular with Latinos/as, there is a long way to go. She goes on to say that religious educators are becoming more attentive to the vast range of approaches people make to the same religious story (Harris and Moran 1998, p. 4). She says that “white religious educators are examining white privilege and power. We who are white are learning—or trying to learn—our own biases, and working more carefully not to assume that our way is the right or only way” (1998, 4).

Harris’ assessment of the field of religious education is illustrated by the number of non-white faculty teaching in theological education. The Association of Theological education reports that while faculty diversity has doubled since 1992, in 2012 there are only 18% of ethnically diverse faculty in all ATS schools (2012, p. 3). The result of this increase is could be due to efforts by the Association of Theological Schools through the Committee on Race and Ethnicity that advocates for women and ethnic scholars. Even with these initiatives, the lack of diversity in theological education communicates to persons of color that they are not important and no-one is there to understand them and their particular context. Both in theological education, and in the church, there is a need for more diverse ethnic voices to be a mentors for other persons of color, and to provide a clearer representation of the God’s people.

### *African-American or Black Theology*

While liberation theology began in the global south among the Latino/a community, liberation theology also includes Africa-American theology, Asian theology, and other ethnic groups who have been oppressed. Africa-American, or black theology became prominent during the 1960’s civil rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. The goal of the movement was for equal rights, the eradication of racism in society, and for black

people to participate in political power. A leading black theologian, James Cone states that black theology is “theology that arises out of the need to articulate the significance of Black presence in a hostile white world. It is black people reflecting religiously on the black experience, attempting to redefine the relevance of the Christian gospel for their lives” (1970, p. 3).

Black theology, like other forms of liberation theology calls an oppressed people to tell their narrative from the past, while developing a new worldview of liberation for the future. Black theology informs Christian education by giving focus to experiences, relationships, and situational dilemmas that black people face in their day-to-day struggle to survive, develop, and progress in an often hostile, uncaring, and white dominated majority (Shockley 1995, p. 321).

An example in the field of Christian education is an African-American critique of Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory. Kohlberg’s theory was developed through interviews of white males, and Carol Gilligan critiques Kohlberg on the basis of gender (the ethics of care), while Vanessa Walker critiques Kohlberg’s theory on the basis of race and culture. Racial identity and culture impact moral development through the areas and responsibilities for one another, as well as in one’s view of themselves (self-identity) (Walker and Snarey 2004, p. 11). Walker notes that care and justice cannot be separated in the African American community; rather, communities seek justice as a means toward equality and care. In other words, in African-American culture to “care for the self is to care for the group (Walker and Snarey 2004, p. 11). Therefore, morality is heavily influenced by priorities regarding community.

### **Feminist Theology**

Feminist theology has emerged as a movement during the 1960’s civil rights movement in the United States and liberation theology of Latin America. Within a few years it had become a global movement situated in political and religious settings. In essence the movement gave focus to the structural injustice between the sexes because men have power over women. It follows the tide of colonization by addressing issues of superiority, patriarchy, power, and sexism (that being a male is the norm). Also, feminism challenges the social order of male domination of women.

All theology is done based on a person’s experience, whether acknowledged or not. Up to this point in history, most theology was done exclusively from the white male perspective. As Elizabeth Dodson Gray states, “what feminist mean when they call the received tradition as ‘androcentric:’ It embodies the perception of the entire world through ‘male-colored’ glasses (1995, p. 199). In this regard, theology had been ‘gender-blind’ by not recognizing its bias perspective and partiality. By women engaging in doing theology it calls into question previous male dominated views and interpretations.

The recent Me-Too Movement has given voice to a new generation of women who have been marginalized and oppressed. The Me-Too Movement is reflective of previous feminist movements in society calling for equality and justice for women. While these movements represent the society at large, it is reflective of how women are often viewed within Christianity. Many denominations do not allow women to be ordained and to have significant leadership roles because of particular biblical interpretations that states that “women are not to have authority over a man” (I Timothy 2:12). This strong patriarchal, masculine authority within the church may serve to discourage women from speaking publicly (Jule & Pedersen, 2006). Jule and Pedersen (2006) argue that Christianity includes “codes of silence for women and public voice

for men” (p. 54). Thus, “men play the part of knowing, of belonging to, and of participating in power, while women play the part of consistent and supportive audience members” (Jule & Pedersen, 2006, p. 54). As a result, women have “far too long in the history of Christian spirituality unfolded under the guise of a false harmony of male and female religious experience” (Durka, 1982, p. 178). Feminist theologians have concluded that Christianity’s contempt for women and their bodies has been an essential backdrop legitimating the violence against women. Historic Christianity defined women as inferior, subordinate, and prone to the demonic (Gray, 1995, p. 206).

An example of a feminist critique of scripture can be found in Philippians 2:6-11, the *kenosis passage*. The Christology of the incarnation of the God-man provides Christians in general and Christian men in particular, with an understanding of a God who moves from a position of power and hierarchy to a place of humility. Even though many Christians interpret this passage positively, feminine theologians have viewed it as oppressive and degrading of women. There is a long standing critique by feminist theologians of “kenotic” Christology on the grounds that it may affirm forms of “self-sacrifice” and “self-abasement” as normative for women, thus keeping them in subordinate roles and possibly used to condone abuse (Coakley, 2001, p. 207). Whereas some men may need to learn forms of moral kenosis that compensate for their tendency to abuse power, other women can be endangered by an emphasis on “self-emptying” that is already damaging to their sense of identity. Since kenosis theology is a central theme in Christian thought it may represent men’s understanding of hierarchy and dominance, whereas for women the theme of self-emptying is more detrimental.

Sarah Coakley (2001) argues that the discussion on freedom and kenosis as self-sacrifice as subordinating, or even abusing, Christian women should be confused with the attempt to reconsider the status of kenosis as a legitimate spiritual goal for both women and men—is a position held by most theologians (p. 208). Feminist theologians argue that the discussion of kenosis is embedded in God, between divine absence and divine presence that “kenotic” space is made for recognition of the other as “other.” In this regard the “other” relates to gender identity. As Coakley states, “the gendered identity of the child is initially formed precisely in its negotiation of the crisis of recognizing its own difference from the mother, and its introduction into the world of language” (2001, p. 208). In this regard it is “kenotic” because the negotiation of the crisis itself involved deep loss, and thus implicitly summons the hope of a future resurrection. This is evident in early childhood development by respecting “otherness” as a form of identity formation. The feminist critique of kenotic Christology reminds Christian educators and pastors who foster aspects of formation and discipleship in women that using language of “self-emptying” and “self-sacrifice” can damage their sense of identity (Maddix & Meier, 2011, p. 6-7).

### **Postcolonial Hermeneutics**

While postcolonial theologies (feminism and liberation) has a longer history in the field, the emergence of postcolonial biblical studies in 1996 by Laura E. Donaldson and *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sugirtharajah, 1998) is relatively new. Donaldson described postcolonial criticism as oppositional reading, a reading like Canaanites: a rescue of voices in the text silenced by dominant readings of the text (1996). She argues that for a multidimensional approach that is keenly aware of the culture, race, class, and gender. In essence she is moving beyond the classical postcolonial model, singling out in particular its failure to include gender and sexuality in a single vision. She goes on to show that a female reading of the Gospel

narratives show that certain female voices are forgotten because of the influence of Colonialism. For example, while feminist and postcolonial scholars have displaced traditional interpretations of the Syro-Phoenician and Canaanite women in Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28, Donaldson gives voice to the demon-possessed daughter through the issue of disability. She cannot speak on her behalf and her healing. She indicates that traditional interpretation of the Bible erases aspects of disability by objectifying her as a means of divine healing (1996; Moore and Segovia, p. 13).

As Moore and Segovia indicate that postcolonial biblical criticism or contextual hermeneutics is different from classical liberation theology because it “relinquishes the center focus on economics and the universal plight to the poor...for a focus on the local, the indigenous, the ethnic, and culturally contingent, with the aim of recovering, reasserting, and reinscribing identities, cultures and traditions that colonial Christianity had erased, suppressed, or pronounced ‘idolatrous’” (2005, p.6).

Postcolonial hermeneutics is an area that needs further exploration for Christian education professors as they engage in understanding Scripture from a particular contextual framework, in this case from a feminist perspective, in order to empower persons who have been of oppressed and neglected. Christian educators can employ this methodology by giving focus to the unheard voices of the text as part of their pedagogical practices.

### **A Way Forward: The Future of Christian Education**

As Christian education seeks to engage the changing ethnic demographics of North America society, the voice of post-colonial studies becomes essential for a way forward for the future of Christian education. While some Christian educators may question the legitimacy, or reject postcolonial studies altogether, women and ethnic voices cannot be neglected or silenced. According to the United States census, 37% of the population is non-Hispanic white, and it is projected that by 2043 the United States will be a minority-majority country (Walsh, 2013). The result of these demographic changes is that the church is changing, and educational ministries are becoming less monolithic.

A way forward for the future of Christian education requires an attentiveness to postcolonial theology and its implications for the field of Christian education. While postcolonial studies in bible and theology may cause pause for some Christian educators, there is a need for engaging these theologies as they relate to the theology and practices of Christian education. So, in what ways can Christian educators learn about theology and practice from postcolonial theologies? How might the methods and practices of Christian education change in light of these postcolonial theologies? How might the discipline of Christian education give a greater focus on listening to contextual voices? The article provides the following suggestions as a way forward for the future of Christian Education:

*1. Situated and Contextual theology.* The field of Christian education is familiar with experienced based education or non-formal approaches to education as a way of knowing. Christian educators are known for teaching for transformation through experience as compared to more formal approaches of transmissive learning. Post-colonial theologies remind us that theology is not *static* but *dynamic* and situated within a particular context. Theology is from “below” instead of from “above,” and emerges from the experience of people who are suffering oppressed, poor, or marginalized. Christian educators have an opportunity to engage in narrative

and story as a way to embed education in particular contexts, and from there develop a theology that reflects the situation of the learner.

2. *More Diverse Voices*. While there has been considerable scholarship in the field of Christian education and among ethnic voices, there is a greater need for these diverse voices to engage in research and writing in the field of Christian education. One of the primary reasons of the lack of voices in the field is due to academic requirements of doctoral level studies to be a professor in the field of Christian education; which are not accessible for persons from brown or black communities. They lack the necessary time and resources to complete a graduate education. Those in Christian higher education will need to begin to prioritize resources to assist persons of color with resources for graduate education, and opportunities for future teaching positions.

Another challenge is that most evangelical universities and seminaries are led by white males—some of whom do not allow women to be in leadership. This patriarchal structure inhibits the ability for women and persons of color to be in positions of leadership. Institutions with departments of Christian education or ministry will need to give priority to developing and equipping women and ethnic diverse leaders for the field of Christian education.

3. *Recognizing Voice and power dynamics*. The emphasis on having “voice” is metaphorical and refers to the right to express oneself in multiple ways (Belenky, 1986). “Voice” enables students to begin to see themselves as producers of knowledge. Christian educators should encourage voice by providing options of personal reflection that honor women and persons of color’s differences. These voices are often not heard because of power dynamics. Power often rears its head in everyday teaching and learning and educators need to be attentive to the capillaries of power and trace them to the extremities, asking us how educational practices affect the teacher and students. For example, lecturing by male educators may serve to reinforce stereotypes of feminine silence. It is also important to develop awareness of explicit and implicit power relationships in the “classroom and of the personal positioning and compromises that are part of our teaching and learning contexts” (Nyhof-Young 2000, p. 442).

4. *Curricular Changes*. Another way Christian educators can engage post-colonial voices is through curricular changes that reflect these particular identities. The addition of courses in contextual theology, ethnic studies, women in ministry, justice and reconciliation, or liberation theology can help students learn more about diverse voices. Also, the inclusion of textbook written by women and ethnic authors help to frame a different discussion about theology and Christian education. Another avenue is to include guest lecturers and speakers from these diverse contexts to speak in classes. The exposure to women and persons of colors provide hope for students as they listen to people who they can identify with.

It may seem obvious in an article about postcolonial theology and Christian education that Christian education professors should include readings post-colonial studies such as liberation, African American, Latino, Ethnic theologies, and Postcolonial biblical studies as part of their course curriculum.

5. *Pedagogical Shifts*. Postcolonial theology promotes community, equality, personal dialogue, creating safe spaces for learning in order to generate safe and trustworthy teaching, and learning environments in which all participants are valued and learn to participate equally (Nyhof-Young 2000), p. 442). Developing appropriate learning contexts by which women and persons of color have an equal voice in the learning process. In order to incorporate female and persons of colors perspectives, experiences, and traditions it is imperative to analyze various aspects of current educational practice. As Slattery states, “this view of *currere* emphasizes the

individual's own capacity to "reconceptualize his or her autobiography, recognize connections with other people, recover and reconstitute the past, imagine, and create possibilities for the future, and come to a greater personal communal awareness" (Slattery 1995, p. 77). The inclusion of diverse teaching styles, course expectations, assignments, and syllabi must be considered when analyzing academia's inclusion of females and ethnically diverse students. Pedagogical considerations include a shift to using more experiential forms of learning, seminar style classrooms and small groups. The adaptation of a theological reflection mirrors the experiential learning cycle: storying the experience, reflecting on it, theorizing and connecting to the tradition, and acting or planning to act. These approaches make an effort to incorporate women's and persons of colors ways of knowing into the learning process (Maddix and Meier, 2010).

5. *Inclusive Language*. In a white male dominated culture, it is easy to use male gender language in teaching and in conversations. This kind of language can be offensive to women and persons of color, particularly when used as a means of power. Micro-aggressions, the degrading of a marginalized group can take place through the use of humor and racial stories. Christian educators need to give attention to how language of gender and ethnic diversity is used in teaching and in conversations with colleagues and students.

## Conclusion

While postcolonial studies have not been central to the field of Christian education, this article, along with this edition of the *Christian Education Journal*, is attempting to draw attention to its importance in Christian education. While there is a multiplicity of views in the field of Christian education regarding postcolonial theology, this article has attempted to situate theology and Christian education in a person's or community's particular context, which requires Christian educators to re-purpose pedagogical practices, curricular and course design, to provide women and persons of color with equal footing. It also requires universities and seminaries to be intentional about the development of women and persons of color for Christian higher education if they plan to engage a changing demographic. Since much of Christian education is dominated by white males—including the author of this article—the way forward is for Christian educators to create space to listen to and learn from the voices of women and persons of color in order to fully value and appreciate the scope of God's people. While this shift will take time, effort, and struggle, it is imperative for Christian educators to re-narrate the story of the gospel by allowing equal voices from diverse contexts and situations to inform the content, methods and practices of Christian education.

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