

Liturgy in a decolonial key

Becca Whitla

This chapter explores the work of decolonial scholar Arturo Escobar in his volume *Sentipensar con la tierra* for its potential to enrich liberating liturgical approaches. Three characteristics of liberating liturgy are specifically explored: how it lifts up the concrete everyday experience of the people, how it is community based, and how it is transformative. These characteristics are shown to intersect with a decolonial theological approach and can be understood along the lines of *sentipensar*, as a tangible example of living, doing, and feeling actualized through the religious experiences and expressions of the people. The chapter concludes with the examination of the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” as a brief case study.

Introduction

In the contexts in which I lead worship—in Toronto, Canada—the realities of life for the people who gather can be extremely diverse, representing many cultures, languages, social and economic classes, abilities, genders, sexual orientations etc. My journey towards engaging decolonial thinking comes out of and is a response to more than twenty five years of animating liturgy in these settings, where I have become aware of the power-plays and colonizing role of the dominant culture. My response to leading liturgy in these messy, intercultural, and often conflictual realities has been to celebrate the multiple and intersecting differences that are present. Inspired by liberation theological insights, I affirm the role of people’s experiences in the task of doing theology as a *locus theologicus* and embrace the decolonizing impetus as a necessary part of a liberating praxis.

In this article, I engage the work of decolonial scholar Arturo Escobar in his volume *Sentipensar con la tierra* to help me think about what insights his proposal could have for liturgy (Escobar 2014). In particular I will reflect on three decolonizing characteristics of liberating liturgy: how it lifts up the concrete everyday experience of the people, how it is community based, and how it is transformative. In

Becca Whitla is professor of pastoral studies at St. Andrew’s College in Saskatoon, where she teaches worship, preaching, and religious education. Her book, *Liberation (De)Coloniality, and Liturgical Practices: Flipping the Song Bird* (Palgrave Macmillan) was released in November, 2020.

my view, these characteristics can be understood along the lines of *sentipensar*, as a tangible example of living, doing, and feeling actualized through the religious experiences and expressions of the people. I conclude with the examination of a hymn as a brief case study.

Sentipensar con la tierra

In *Sentipensar con la tierra*, Escobar writes that thinking-feeling with the territory (*sentipensar con el territorio*) involves thinking from the heart and from the mind or *co-razonar*. Escobar’s articulation of *sentipensar* rises out of his work and experience with Afro-descendent communities in Colombia. Drawing primarily on the very particular experience of these communities—along with an acknowledgement of similar experiences and wisdoms from Indigenous contexts—Escobar insists that the act of

sentipensar entails the art of living learned in relation to the particular land inhabited by these communities as they think-feel with the territories, cultures, and knowledges (*conocimientos*) of their peoples.

For Escobar, this act and art of *sentipensar* is connected to a complex web of factors that resists, exists, or re-exists (Spanish *r-existir*) beyond the modern-colonial capitalist world system.¹ *Sentipensar* therefore rejects decontextualized knowledges that emerge from the notions of “development,” “growth,” and “economy” (Escobar, 2014, 16) and resists what he calls the “dualistic ontologies” of modern thinking by enacting viable alternatives to modern “one-worlders” (*Uni-Mundistas*) and their universal(ist) claims and narratives. Instead, *r-existir* is based on other ontological commitments and ways of “*mundificar la vida*,” similar to what decolonial scholars call “other ways of knowing” (Escobar 2014, 21).²

Escobar’s work is rooted in an understanding of the interconnectedness of life, in ways of being, thinking, and doing that go well-beyond colonizing Eurocentric modes of understanding the world. Such modes emphasize the individual, instrumental rationality, the “efficient” exploitation of the environment, and private property, among other things (Escobar 2014, 58). Escobar’s work thus entails a repudiation of the unrelenting avarice and wanton destruction of life through coloniality’s abettor, neo-liberal global capitalism.

A working definition of coloniality is in order at this point. As I have articulated it elsewhere,

The concept of coloniality describes the all-encompassing residual web of colonizing processes, tendencies, and practices and its ongoing manifestation, especially in present capitalist, globalizing, neoliberal systems. Decolonial scholars argue that coloniality brings together the axes of colonialism, modernity, and capitalism. They insist that “modern” history must be read from the perspective of the conquest of the Americas. Coloniality affects who we are, regulates how we understand the world, and conditions all our relations. Coloniality also unmasks the ideology of superiority in which the church, the empire, and notions of what was “civilized” were understood to be inseparable; this ideology permeated the

European and Euro North American colonial projects (Whitla 2018a, 21).

As I see it, and like other decolonial approaches, Escobar’s proposal depends upon affirming ways of being, thinking, doing, and feeling that go outside coloniality and the pervasiveness of colonizing attitudes, along the lines of my definition above. He imagines a world other-wise, a pluriverse world with many cosmovisions and a web of relations that goes beyond human paradigms of knowing to include all of creation. His proposal depends upon understanding ourselves as related to particular territories with all the attending physicality, history, culture, and cosmovision that such a territorialization entails.

A comprehensive analysis of Escobar’s proposal goes beyond the purview of this short article. I highlight, however, that its uniqueness and relevance lie in its articulation of paradigms for other ways of living (thinking, doing, being, and feeling) that build up alternatives to the present destruction of entire communities, habitats, and species, a destruction that threatens life on our planet. Yet, there are also significant gaps which, if addressed, could enrich his proposal. For the purposes of thinking about the implications of his work for liturgy, I highlight two: the lived experience of religion and self-interrogation as a scholarly tool for a praxis of *sentipensar*.

First, there are hints in Escobar’s work of the possibility of a richer engagement with people’s lived experiences of religious faith. He writes about cosmovisions, spirituality, and supernatural beings as part of what he calls a pluriversal ontological approach, but he does not spell out these concepts in this work. We know that spirituality and popular religious traditions play a role in the manner in which people interact with and make sense of their environment. By not concretizing his references to lived experiences of religion, he misses an opportunity to expand his thinking to incorporate the reality that is experienced by people on the ground. I wonder how his proposal might shift were he to allow the supernatural or spiritual/religious “world” to significantly impact his thinking about ontology. Like other post and decolonial scholars, in this proposal of *sentipensar* Escobar leaves himself vulnerable to being critiqued for displaying an allergy to people’s actual lived concrete religious traditions.³

1 The Spanish *r-existir* is different from *re-existir*. It encompasses “the historical RESISTANCE of nations and women to the patriarchal and capitalist way of life as such as the social and environmental destruction” (*Rexistir* 2018).

2 Walter Mignolo writes about these other ways of knowing as a stance of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009).

3 For a discussion of the neglect of engagement of religion and Christianity in particular, see (Whitla 2019).



Second, I propose that Escobar, and several other decolonial scholars for that matter, could reflect more intentionally on the role of ethno-racial identities, including his own, as a way to concretize his proposal. I argue that scholars must also territorialize themselves by articulating who they are and where they are located, including by interrogating their own ethno-racial backgrounds and the privileges that come with them. Bodies, racialization, and ethno-cultural traditions are territorially located in scholarship as well as in communities and social movements. Self-location and interrogation as a mode of territorialization could flow naturally out of Escobar's work and deepen its applicability.⁴ I return to this self-location and self-interrogation later. For now, I simply wish to assert that it is a crucial step if power dynamics are to be unmasked. Also, I insist that worship cannot become liberating—and we cannot liberate worship—if mechanisms that leave power systems intact are unaddressed. This process must begin with ourselves.

Decolonizing liturgies

Decolonizing liturgies emphasize both a lived experience of religion and a rich process of self-location and self-interrogation. They resonate with the kind of alternative way of living Escobar is advocating, on one hand, and could enrich the notion of *sentipensar* as he articulates it, on the other. Here, I want to be cautious not to suggest a wholesale appropriation of *sentipensar*; the danger of intellectual extractivism must be heeded. To avoid extractivism, any use of *sentipensar* must honour the context and people from which the language of *sentipensar* first emerged. At the same time, other communities engaged in their own struggles against the forces of coloniality can be bolstered by the language of *sentipensar*, knowing and acknowledging that it comes

from this Afro-Colombian context. In what follows I describe some of the decolonizing characteristics of liberating liturgies, with a view to suggesting some of the ways in which they intersect with a decolonial approach.

Lived experience of the people

I contend that liturgies can be understood as tangible decolonial examples of being, doing, thinking, and feeling otherwise. I will reflect in particular on three decolonizing characteristics for a liberating praxis: how decolonizing liturgy is rooted in the concrete lived experience of the people, is community based, and is transformative. First, decolonizing liturgy is concrete. It is engaged with and in the world in the historically and geographically located and culturally conditioned lives of the people. One could say it is territorialized — to use Escobar's parlance. It draws on people's daily lived experience, what Latina scholars call *lo cotidiano*, which the people bring with them when they come together to worship.⁵ Along the lines of *sentipensar*, *lo cotidiano* can be described as a combination of "action, sentimiento (feeling, which in the Latino/a sense is a form of aesthetic reasoning), and ideals" (García-Johnson 2009, 19). Affirming the porous boundary between worship and the rest of life, everyday life is experienced "holistically and aesthetically within practices of the community, music, humor, and religious celebrations" (García-Johnson 2009, 19).

This affirmation of concrete lived reality in worship also echoes liberationist emphases on the everyday as a source for theology and thus invites human cries of pain and suffering to "co-mingle with our praise and our thanks" in embodied expressions that range from anguished lament to ecstatic joy, expressing "humanity at full stretch" (Saliers 2000, 289, 278). Indeed, we can affirm that *lo cotidiano* is not only a place for celebration but also the space where "people face the complex and messy reality of suffering, shame, brokenness, and struggle toward transformation of their world and reality," where, in liberationist terms, people make "their faith concrete and historical" (DeAnda and Medina 2009, 188). In this kind of space, our thinking, feeling, do-

4 For a discussion of two other gaps in Escobar's proposal, see Néstor Medina's chapter. Medina notes that Escobar problematically uses the verb *ser* instead of *estar* when discussing "being," bolstering the Eurocentric notion of "being" along the lines of Heidegger's *Dasein*. Similarly, Escobar's insistence on the use of the term "ontology" renders his proposal overly abstract. Medina proposes instead the use of "the cultural" to reflect the present re-configuration of the world by way of multiple cultural communities along the lines of Escobar's pluriversal approach.

5 Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes that *lo cotidiano* is "at the heart of mujerista theology and ... is important to all liberation theologies and struggles" (Isasi-Díaz 2002, 6).

ing, and being intertwine as worlds come together, especially interculturally, through the multiple human experiences that are present in worshipping spaces.

Experiences of daily life are also permeated with a variety of border experiences, to nod towards another decolonial concept. There are borders between cultures, languages, class and status, places, and geographic locations, among other things. The risky, even dangerous reality of some congregation members intertwines with the privileged reality of others because “borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 2007, 19). Moments of border liturgy can thus provoke the reclaiming of other ways of knowing drawn from the particular experiences of the marginalized and also promote a critical interrogation of present power structures, including what is traditionally done in worship, as well as how it is done.

Walter Mignolo articulates the interchange in such border spaces as border thinking. Resonating with *sentipensar*, he notes that subaltern reason inhabits different bodies, draws on different sensibilities and memories, is intersubjective rather than individualistic, and has what he calls an “overall different world-sensing” which draws on the “realms of the senses beyond the eyes” (Mignolo 2000, 60). Border thinking, like border liturgy, is a process which calls both for 1) building up “local histories, restoring the dignity that the Western idea of universal history took away from millions of people” and also for 2) delinking and decolonizing knowledge from European/modern/colonial/patriarchal epistemologies (Mignolo 2000, x).

Worshipping in a decolonial way requires navigating across borders and between spaces as a kind of syncopation—movements of disruption which compel us to at once inhabit and transgress border spaces and invite us to engage relationally in cross-border thinking and, I would add, cross-border being, cross-border feeling, and of course, cross-border doing, which here includes worshipping.⁶ A real move into border spaces is a dislocating and risky business; it is not about merely paying lip

service to this monumental task. “Being” in a border space is a relational move which requires nothing short of a conversion to an-other as a radical act of love to relinquish power, following Jesus, especially for those with power.

An emphasis on concrete lived experience continually challenges us to enliven our worship, our praxis of liturgy, by lifting up the whole-life experience of the people as a source and location for theology and liturgy, especially across borders and between cultures. It preferentially pays attention to the experience and concrete expressions of the most marginalized, particularly the experience of women and most of all, marginalized women, so neglected in historic religious practices.⁷

Rising out of community

Second, decolonizing liturgies rise out of community. Yet the notion of “community” is complex. In Toronto, Canada, for instance, a city reputed to be the most diverse in the world, faith communities wrestle with plurality because of multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic realities. Often, many cultures, languages, classes, and value systems are represented in a single community. Many people in the city have been deterritorialized, often violently, and are in the process of re-territorializing, trying to root themselves in their new place, with all of the attendant challenges of discrimination, marginalization, poverty, etc. Many are also wrestling with what re-rooting means in relation to the historical-colonial violation of Indigenous peoples, lands, and cultures.⁸ In some churches in Canada, for instance, services now begin with the Indigenous practice of a land or territorial acknowledgement—a ritual expression of gratitude for the specific land on which people are situated and the first peoples who lived there. This rite, though contested because of concerns it can become an empty gesture, resonates with the territorialization of *sentipensar* among the Afro-Colombian communities, as Escobar articulates it.

Like *sentipensar*, a decolonizing approach to worship insists that all the peoples present in our faith communities must be uplifted and affirmed as we think-feel what we do. Such an affirmation in-

6 I have written about a syncopating liberating praxis. See (Whitla 2018b).

7 See Medina (2015).

8 See Medina (2017).



cludes the cosmovisions and cultures we bring with us in their pluriversality, as well as our relationship to all of life around us in creation. If taken seriously, this approach requires a commitment to relational interculturality on the ground, by which I mean a praxis that is radically inclusive; it would stand against structural approaches to exclude and privilege some people and would seek to create new alternatives for conversation among different cultural traditions and peoples. Inherited worship practices would thus be challenged when they reinforce traditional dominant culture power structures, and substantial new spaces would be opened up and protected for expressions from marginalized communities.

As I see it, taking on this responsibility is a potentially decolonizing move, a commitment to interrogate ourselves especially with regards to the kinds of social power society ascribes to us due to a number of factors. These factors include: how people are racialized, economic status, including the ownership of land/property, where we are from, where we live, the kind of passport we carry if we even have a passport, gender, age, place of employment, (dis)ability, the language(s) we speak, and the religion we practice, among other things. Relationships with other people are thus put in the context of community which are in turn part of our institutional, ethno-cultural, and even national settings. These ever-widening circles of self-reflective, intercultural relationality are essential in a liberating praxis. Such a praxis begins with a reflection on who we are and where we are, so that we can root our actions in an interrogation of ourselves with respect to the territories we inhabit, the people with whom we are in relationship, our relationships with all other sentient beings, and the imperceptible links of colonization that shape all our relations.

Transformation through decolonizing liturgies

Third, decolonizing liturgies must embody the liberationist push toward the transformation of social and ideological systems of oppression against marginalized communities, including in worship and liturgical practices. Decolonizing worship, at its best, offers an alternative to the rapacious greed of the capitalist modern-colonial world system, actualizing another way of living. It nourishes us for our transformative work in the world. It also transforms

us and our communities, already modelling a world where other worlds are possible. To be liberating, liturgies must be spaces where people are actually engaged in a communal praxis which decolonizes, as agents working to enact the liberating love which is at the heart of Christianity (Segundo 1974).

By decolonizing liturgies, a sacramental space is prepared where the divine can be encountered. The role of the agency of the people, especially the marginalized, in bringing about transformation thus must be understood as taking place in collaboration with the Divine, animated by the Holy Spirit. But enacting decolonizing liturgies, actually making them happen, is a messy and painstaking task. Glimpses of the Divine take place amidst, in, and in-between experiences of pain, death, despair, and suffering; they occur in specific contexts in which people think-feel in order to make sense of these realities. Decolonizing liturgies thus rely on a proleptic orientation which affirms that the pain and suffering of this world cannot be the last word. It insists that we all have a part to play in building the realm of God; we can already anticipate and model the eschaton, another possible world. In the diverse congregations of Toronto, decolonizing liturgies also require those from the dominant culture, like myself, to heed a clarion call to side with, enter into, and walk in solidarity with the marginalized. This accompanying requires a hermeneutics of silence with deep listening and paying attention to those voices that have been marginalized or even silenced.⁹

In this spirit, let us briefly follow one hymn's journey as a way to sample the implications of paying attention to marginalized voices. As we shall see, a hymn can be either an embodiment of coloniality or a song of liberation or even both at the same time, depending on the context. When we look more closely at some of our practices, we may discover that decolonizing has already begun, as marginalized communities reconfigure the artifacts of empire.

⁹ Latino theologian Roberto Goizueta's notion of *acompañamiento* or accompaniment helps illuminate the process. Goizueta argues that this authentic relational justice presupposes solidarity in the midst of suffering together with the poor and marginalized (and not for them) before any kind of genuine pluralism can be achieved (Goizueta 1995, 13).

“What a friend we have in Jesus” Expression of coloniality or song of liberation?

As we have seen, liturgies which seek to be in a decolonial key demand that we celebrate and affirm practices which rise out of the lived daily experience of the people, are rooted in community, and are transformational. But they also require liturgists to make a commitment to interrogate coloniality at the heart of what we do in worship; worship practices, especially in my own Anglo North American settings, need to be radically decolonized. This decolonizing is a crucial part of a broader liberating process. We know from the work of decolonial scholars that coloniality affects all aspects of human existence: who we are, how we behave, and how we understand the world and all our relations. Indeed, people continue to live with the legacy of colonialism in a lived “coloniality of being” and that includes how we worship (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

In Anglo-Canada, “coloniality” stems from the British contingent of European colonialism. Liturgists and liturgical theologians who are committed to a liberating liturgy in this context thus need to confront the many ways worship has been captivated by modern-capitalist-colonialist-rationalistic-patriarchal thinking. Unmasking coloniality helps make sense of how mechanisms of oppression—whether they be white supremacy, gender exclusion, or settler colonialism, to name a few—are still present in our practices, including, for example, our hymn singing.

Corresponding with and contributing to the ascendancy of the British Empire, British hymnody, particularly of the Victorian era, was imbued with coloniality and was exported and imposed in the Canadian context and elsewhere. Coloniality impacted the way music is understood, taught, composed, performed, and experienced, and has strongly shaped worship practices.¹⁰ Let us consider “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” in relation to these is-

sues, a hymn written at the zenith of the British Empire, in 1855 by Joseph M. Scriven.¹¹

A decolonizing stance which seeks to interrogate coloniality in this hymn text draws our attention to lines like “weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care” which can lead one to describe this hymn as a sentimental and pietistic reduction of human nature to a kind of pathetic iniquitous being.¹² Emphasizing a theology of substitutionary atonement, it essentializes the singing subject as a depraved sinful being, dependent on the superior salvific nature of the Christian God. But a liberating approach to liturgy also demands that we pay attention to how worship is being lived out on the ground by the people and how it is connected to their lived every day experience, even including hymns which are part of the forces of colonialism. How then might “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” be reconfigured?

In the spring of 1987, the mother of my exiled Sotho South African boyfriend died at her home in Soweto, South Africa. In Toronto, we organized a makeshift memorial service at my parents’ house, where members of the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress — all political refugees — gathered to grieve with Neo. At a certain point, the leader of the proceedings announced that we would all join together to sing a hymn “familiar all over the world.” We began to sing verse one: “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!// What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!...” (Hymnary.org 2019).

In other places, I have analyzed the way oppressed communities have changed the words of traditional hymns to transform the theological meaning. In this case, the singers changed the meaning of the song *through* the very act of singing. With a liberationist hermeneutical lens, the pietistic reading of this text was disrupted as these singers flipped the song, and it became instead a song of defiance, a locus of contestation. It affirmed the real-life griefs, pain, and trial of dehumanizing cir-

10 In other work, I use “coloniality of music” to describe the multiple ways in which coloniality has pervasively infected music, music making, and discourses about music and has contributed to making Eurocentric approaches to music dominant (Whitla 2018b).

11 Scriven wrote the poem to comfort his mother living in Ireland while he was in Canada. For the full text and biography of Scriven see (Hymnary.org 2019).

12 Verse three reads: Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?/ Precious Savior, still our refuge—take it to the Lord in prayer!// Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!// In his arms he’ll take and shield you;/ Thou wilt find a solace there (Hymnary.org 2019).



cumstances—the hardship of life under the brutal rule of the Apartheid regime. Singing this song promised hope, lifted up the fundamental human-ness of the singers and became an encouragement to continue in the struggle for those whose lives had been dedicated to overthrowing the racist government. When we sang with Neo, we all bore witness to his exile and to his grief; as comrades and as allies, we embodied a theology of solidarity in the act of our singing.

Canadian Anglican Indigenous Bishop, Mark MacDonald affirms that, in contexts like this, the actual singing can be just as important as the words. He notes, for instance, the slow fervent style of hymn singing in many Indigenous communities is appreciated and evaluated for its passionate commitment and expression, for its thinking-feeling. MacDonald says that hymn singing can be a mode of resistance and it is also a way in which Indigenous language and culture was carried. Theologically speaking, MacDonald says that “underneath what we see and hear is a dynamic of life which is unveiled and released in singing” (MacDonald 2016).¹³ Hymn singing, according to MacDonald, thus enables a “different cosmovision, including an eschatology which is defiant because it is present in the here and now through singing” (Whitla 2018b). I propose that this kind of decolonial approach to hymn singing can be understood along the lines of *sentipensar*.

Susan Beaver who is the *Kanienkeha* minister at Grand River United Church on Six Nations reserve near Toronto, Canada would agree about the meaning of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”¹⁴ In her community, the hymn is deeply meaningful for many Indigenous people including the people at her church, because it helps those who suffer; struggle with grief; need help, especially spiritual help; or face other challenges like the temptations of addiction, among other things. She says that it is very much a cry for help from the people. “The thing is,” Beaver writes, “in the history of the church as our people see it, the visitors came and told us how we worship is wrong. So we picked up their Bible and churches and hymns and quite loved them or understood them as the norm. There is a lot of old stuff that for sure needs to be jettisoned by us. But with

the new hymns and the new hymn books the people say, ‘We worship the way they told us to worship and now they’re coming in and telling us our worship is wrong again’” (Beaver 2017).

Other examples of the singing of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” might include its use at the funeral of eminent Cuban theologian Maestro René Castellanos, at the *Seminario Evangélico de Teología de Matanzas* in Cuba in 2012 with Castellanos’ own translation; at the Toronto Pride parade in June in celebration and affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community; or indeed among the many working class communities throughout North America where this song remains beloved for its affirmation of the experience of human suffering and its celebration of an intimate loving relationship with Jesus.

In these contexts of struggle, this traditional hymn, which one might be inclined to reject because of its “old-fashioned theology,” can actually embody a resistance to the very constructs of coloniality when it is reconfigured by the communities that sing it, as they think-feel their way to their own transformation. Along with songs and ritual practices from the Global South, such transformations offer liberating possibilities for worship practices. The daily lived experience of the people is affirmed as we transform worship in community, give up Eurocentric modes, and embrace the painstaking process of conversion which requires us to become something other than what we are. In these ways, entire communities begin to also engage in their own processes of decolonization and transformation. In recognizing our complicity with systems of coloniality and decolonizing ourselves and what we do, we seek to change ourselves and transform our world. In this space, worship is a way to do theology and to think-feel otherwise. Worship thus reflects who we are and who we want to become as active agents of a liberating praxis proclaiming what is and what ought to be as we reconfigure worship in a decolonial key.

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¹³ McDonald’s insights about culture and other ways of knowing illustrate that discourses using the language of “decolonial” are certainly not limited to Latin American decolonial arenas.

¹⁴ Kanienkeha is the Indigenous word for “Mohawk.”

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