

# Decoloniality, Ecology and Sustainability

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Colonialism has left a long shadow over the Latin American continent. Among its many side-effects are environmental degradation and a population struggling to maintain itself in sustainable ways. Exploitation of natural resources, enslavement of peoples, and the elimination of indigenous populations are among its painful consequences. Colonialism refers not only to economic disparities and ecological threats but encompasses an empire mentality that continues to assail us. To a great extent, religion has served as an ideological scaffolding, to justify the sacrifices required from the most vulnerable and disenfranchised. While the entire planet groans in pain, humanity can no longer limit itself with mainstream views of development and theological discourses that condone this destruction. However, instead of despairing, we are invited to envision sustainable ways of dwelling on the land, embracing ways of life that honor the intersections between economic, environmental, and social wellbeing. To enable this, it is paramount to reclaim theological discourses and practices that maintain life in abundance and affirm the dignity of all living creatures. This can be done through an ecological approach – studying the *oikos*, the house and the multiple households we inhabit: our personal bodies, social bodies, and the body of the entire planet.

## Introduction

From the way we dress to the programs on television that we watch, from the music we listen to, to the news we pay attention to, there is a hierarchy of values that is deeply influenced by a colonial mentality. Colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's lands and goods, but it is also an introjection, an imposition, and eventually an appropriation of the colonial mentality as one's own – and this is called coloniality (Mignolo 2011, 2).<sup>1</sup> Although my observations refer primarily to colonialism and coloniality as experienced in Latin America and the Caribbean, it should be noted that colonialism is a recurrent and widespread

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feature of human history.<sup>2</sup> It usually comes with the label *empire*: Roman, Mongolian, Ottoman, British, American, etc. Latin America, too, has had its empires, including among indigenous populations. Not only the notable Aztecs and Incas, in the 15th century, who extracted tributes in services and goods from other indigenous groups, but also their most

1 Coloniality refers to the logic at the basis of historical colonialisms, related to the colonial matrix of power or coloniality of power (Mignolo 2011, 2).

2 A current example is the recent exchange between Mexico and Spain on the issue of colonialism, with Mexican president, Obrador, demanding Spain apologize for the atrocities committed against indigenous people (Burgen and Agren 2019).

recent iterations – with nations of the continent eager to exert power over others.

## Deconstructing Colonialism

It is important to remember that, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the concept of civilization came hand-in-hand with how human beings were positioned within empires. Europeans eventually labeled the Mayans, Incas and Aztecs as civilizations because they had a hierarchical structure: there were rulers and ruled, those who decided and those who obeyed (Hanke 1959). What made the Aztecs the strongest empire was also the amount of violence used to ensure its domain. They were known for practices that included human sacrifice, as part of the religious ceremony that they believed appeased their gods to spare them from suffering. Those indigenous communities that were egalitarian, rotated leadership, or did not comply with European notions were labeled as barbarians. They were deemed savages, others, inferior beings without the capacity to make decisions on their own.<sup>3</sup>

From the colonial practices of pillaging land and people, enslavement of indigenous and African populations, forceful conversions to Christianity, and robbing human beings of their dignity, to the modern practices of neo-colonialism that pervade hearts and minds, Latin American history is a history of institutionalized looting. Although it may have started in 1492, when Christopher Columbus first arrived at the island of Hispaniola (modern day Dominican Republic and Haiti), its legacy continues well into the 21st century. Recently, corruption and mismanagement have become topics for populist right-wing rhetoric, but the reality is that the appropriation of public assets for private gain and using personal influence for public prestige are a trademark of Latin American and Caribbean politics and economics. Cleptocracy, rather than democracy, has been the longest running system in the continent.

Eduardo Galeano's magnum opus, *The Open Veins of Latin America*, maps this quite well. First published in 1971, it was considered so dangerous for its critical views that the military governments

of Chile, Argentina and Uruguay banned it. Galeano was exiled for detailing the pillage Latin America and the Caribbean have suffered. He not only denounces it, but illustrates how the mentality of the colonizers has pervaded and continues to influence social, political and economic decision-making.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of colonialism are felt on both the land and its people. In post-Columbus Latin America and the Caribbean, their population became victims of enslavement and genocide. The riches of the land, the bodies that inhabited this land, and the land itself were plundered. For the longest time, the economy of the continent could be summarized as an "after-dinner" economy, that is, everything one takes after the main meal: coffee, sugar, cocoa, tobacco, and rum. When markets fluctuated in Europe or the United States, these were the first items taken off the grocery list. More recently, exploitative trade deals and political alliances reveal not only a dependence from developing nation on international empires (e. g. the US and more recently China) but also the creation of national elites who collaborate with and benefit from the exploitation of their fellow citizens. Galeano's book is particularly revealing of the historical willingness of Latin American leaders to defend foreign interests. It details a string of murderous US-backed dictators and the arrangements made to cover up this bloody history in the form of neocolonialism:

These so-called local elites inherited the colonial state whose function was not to serve the colonized but to exploit them. Classical colonialism ostensibly ended when these local collaborators demonstrated, through training and internalization of colonial values, their proclivity to serve as auxiliaries of neocolonialism (Bulhan 2015, 243).

An update of Galeano's book would certainly include the expropriation of wealth and the environmental degradation that the latest iteration of colonial interests – neoliberalism – has bestowed upon the continent. The town of Brumadinho in Brazil illustrates the way in which international conglomerates are able to exploit natural resources without accountability towards local populations and environmental safety. Tragedy struck on January 25, 2019, when the rupture of a tailings dam in Bru-

3 Quijano argues that the colonial structure of power resulted in a caste system, ranking Spaniards at the top and those that they conquered at the bottom due not only to their different colour skin but also their presumably inferior culture (Quijano 2007, 168–178).

4 Similar views are presented by authors such as Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, Orlando Fals Borda, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, etc.



madinho, released a mudflow that covered houses, animals and people. At least 206 people died as a result of the collapse, and the environmental impact of the toxic mud is still being assessed. The dam is owned by Vale, the same company involved in the 2015 Mariana dam disaster, also in Brazil. The Mariana dam was an iron ore tailings dam, and its rupture killed 19 people and was described, at that time, as the worst environmental disaster in Brazilian history. “The level of toxicity in the tailings is not yet clear, but iron oxide can choke river sand and poison the surrounding vegetation. It can also compact the soil, preventing new growth of plants on land. Three years after the previous disaster, water from the affected Doce River is still legally unfit for human consumption in 90 % of monitoring stations” (Watts 2019). Around 60 million cubic meters of iron waste flowed into the Rio Doce, causing toxic mudflows to pollute the river and its estuary.

Like many other cash-strapped countries, the economies that stem from colonial, neocolonial, or neoliberal policies are not concerned with sustainable practices that ensure the wellbeing of the land and its people. To the contrary. Cash-crops such as sugar cane, coffee, cocoa, and more recently soy beans and cattle are geared towards profit at the expense of environmental and human sustainability. They foment slash and burn, deforestation, and heavy use of pesticides and herbicides. Agro-business replaces family farms because industrial-size ventures are seen as more profitable than organic farming and cooperatives.

In his book, Galeano renders Latin America a continent blessed with bountiful natural resources that has been systematically stripped of its wealth while its people remain among the poorest on earth, with high levels of infant mortality, illiteracy and child prostitution. Missing from Galeano’s account, however, are the movements of resistance that never allowed the colonizing discourse and practice to prevail. Not reported are the micro and macro modes that opposed colonialism, engaging historic figures such as Zapata, Tupac Amaru, and Toussaint L’Ouverture. The history of colonialism is also filled with attempts of decoloniality. This resistance, carried out by movements within civil society and revolutionary struggles cannot be deemed as inconsequential.

Take the rebellions of enslaved people, for example. In 1835, in Salvador, Bahia (Brazil), a small group of slaves and former slaves, inspired by Mus-

lim teachings, rose up against the government (Reis 1993). This uprising is known as the *malê* revolt, as Muslims were known, from the Yoruba, as “*imales*”. Even if their revolt was suppressed, they were part of the long tradition of resistance and resilience, similar to the Haitian revolution (1791–1804). Further, when systematic and structural changes were not complete, there were always movements that were inspired by hope. Runaway slaves formed communities that subverted the logic of subservience and racism. *Quilombola* communities, formed by runaway enslaved people, continue to thrive. Today, many of these communities are engaged in sustainable agriculture, production for self-consumption, and selling their surplus crops at local markets. In addition to these, the Quilombola community in São Lourenço, RS (which I recently visited) also produces artwork that celebrates their Afro-Brazilian heritage, displayed through, among other mediums, paintings of strong black women as a celebration of their role as keepers of the culture.

While there are individuals and communities drawing on the power of resistance and resilience to curb the power of colonialism, there are also efforts to minimize the history and the effect of colonialism itself. In Spain, for instance, there is an attempt to rewrite Spanish colonial history by labeling it as the “black legend” (*leyenda negra*). It claims that “colonialism” was allegedly invented (like *fake news*) by people outside of Spain to instill a feeling of guilt and shame onto the Spaniards. In the words of one of the founders of the Spanish Civilization Foundation, Borja Cardelús, “We need to improve the self-esteem and cohesion of Spaniards when it comes to their shared history and what they have contributed to humanity... Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro brought ‘a far more humanitarian system’ to the Aztec and Inca empires they conquered” (Jones 2018). In other words, we are witnessing a 21st century re-hashing of the arguments used by 15th and 16th century conquistadors – that the expansion of the Iberian empires was also an expansion of Christendom, bringing along civilization and an elevation of the native soul.

The argument needs to be made that colonialism is real. In spite of the attempts to minimize its effects and “re-write” history, the imbalance in power and access to goods that colonialism generated must be recognized. It continues to leave a lasting shadow over countries all over the world. The first challenge for scholars involved with the teaching and practice of theology is memory. How can we memorialize



the tragedies of colonialism without dwelling on victimization? Can the memories of past oppressions help devise ways to overcome them in the present? How can we emphasize agency in the midst of structures that deny the power of grassroots initiatives (similar to those we visited in our field trips during this conference) or gloss over them as romantic exceptions instead of viable alternatives? Is it possible to honor the pain of the land, lamenting our tragedies, while still remaining hopeful?

## The complexities of colonialism and the intersectionality needed to dismantle it

Before Eduardo Galeano, Frantz Fanon had also addressed the effects of colonialism. Frantz Fanon was born in 1925, on the Caribbean island of Martinique, which was then a French colony. During WWII, Fanon joined the French army and, after being stationed in Morocco and Algeria, served in the battle of Alsace. He experienced severe racism in Europe. For example, when the Allied forces crossed into Germany with photojournalists, Fanon and his fellow Afro-Caribbean soldiers were not included in any of the photos. The regiment was “bleached” of all non-white soldiers. Another example of racism, as he recalled, was that white women freed by black soldiers preferred to dance with fascist Italian prisoners instead of Fanon and his fellow Afro-Caribbean soldiers (Gordon 2015). After the war Fanon returned to Martinique to finish his baccalaureate education, but eventually went to France to study medicine and psychiatry. After qualifying as a psychiatrist in 1951, Fanon worked in France for a while but found his way to Algeria (1953), where he stayed until his deportation, in 1957.

Fanon’s life may present helpful insights for practical theology because it reflects the paradox of identity both as a result of colonialism and its resistance. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon criticized the dehumanizing effects of colonialism upon individuals and nations. The book is “an indictment of the violence and savagery of colonialism which he ends with a passionate call for a new history of humanity to be initiated by a decolonized Third World” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Frantz Fanon”). One of the ways colonialism takes shape is through the mind. The oppressed always believe the worst about themselves. Fanon was able to address the trauma of being categorized as an “inferior other” by a dominant racist culture, and

from this place recuperate a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging.

Fanon helps us understand why people vote against their own interests, why they support those who are only looking out for themselves, or who believe that criticism based on evidence can be dismissed as fake. He dissects the colonizing project that makes people not want to step out of the colonizing pattern and mentality, but rather wish to be colonized by a bigger and better power. Fanon names this hierarchical worldview as the definition of the black human being as “negro.” It is not only a label based on race, but it constitutes an ideological construction with its own reverberations. Based on psycho-analytic observations, Fanon reflects on the trauma of colonialism and its effects: it promotes negative attitudes towards other black people and Africa, normalizes attitudes of debasement, and presents itself as the only way being in the world – so much so that no other alternative appears to be possible (Fanon 1965).

The difficulty of overcoming the sense of alienation that negrification sets up as necessary for the black human being lies in learning to see oneself not just as envisioned and valued (that is, devalued) by the white dominant culture but simultaneously through a perspective constructed both in opposition to and independently from the racist/racialized mainstream, a parallel perspective in which a black man or woman’s value judgments—of oneself and of others of one’s race—do not have to be filtered through white norms and values. It is only through development of this latter perspective that the black man or woman can shake off the psychological colonization that racist phenomenology imposes (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Frantz Fanon”).

Besides race and class, also gender identity has been a source of alienation and stigmatization. Feminist theory has explored value judgement and stereotypes that affect women and all those who embrace gender fluidity. Judith Butler identified the conformity to binaries – male/female, rich/poor, black/white, or colonizer/colonized – as a performance. Feminist, womanist, and queer theologies draw from the notion of performativity to explain why women, for example, suffer under male gaze. Women need to perform femininity, and in Brazil this means exposing our bodies while hiding our brains. Women conform to what we perceive as the expectations society has for us, considering that a woman’s value is her beauty and sensuality. The reduction of human beings to certain characteristics limits human potential and universalizes these





traits in order to create systems of oppression and perpetuate social hierarchies.

While decoloniality has been used to refer to the intellectual break away from the colonizers' ideas that made the colonized feel inferior, it also refers to the process of self-determination – whether as individuals or nations – that can range from nonviolent revolutions to wars of national liberation. We assume that, in the same way countries want to break the yoke of colonial power and become independent, human beings long for autonomy and agency. We may believe that people seek liberation and self-determination. But Fanon observes that the colonized mind adopts the mindset of the colonizer, claiming it as its own, thus introjecting a sense of worthlessness. It is not only more convenient and safer to have others making decisions on one's own behalf, but one's very capacity to make these decisions is questioned. In this entrapment, self-determination is not only a fraught concept but is also seen as a threat.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire echoes Fanon's ideas in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire points out that the oppressed have a dual existence. Because "being human" is a privilege of the oppressors, those who are oppressed internalize the oppressors' mentality because the dominant group is seen as normative. To be human, then, is to emulate the oppressors. In a capitalist and consumerist society, to be is to have. Those who belong to the dominant groups understand that it is their privilege to both possess material goods, but also people. People are dehumanized and turned into objects, who can be owned and disposed of. For Paulo Freire, through consciousness raising, those who have been historically subjugated can reclaim their own agency. But this liberation is neither an individualistic effort nor something that can be done for others. He states: "While no one liberates themselves through their efforts alone, neither are they liberated by others" (Freire 1972, 42). This process of liberation happens through mutual support and encouragement, *with* each other, but not *for* the other. Finally, Freire points out that those who are oppressed also have the capacity to become oppressors. They can reverse the roles and use the same tactics used by their oppressors.

Fanon and Freire do not have an idealized view of those who have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised. Both name the perils of a mere turning the tables in the struggle for liberation, to seize privilege and social positions while replicating the same structures of hierarchy. A decolonization

that simply replaces the settler elite by a native elite that continues to exploit its population is no decolonization. It is merely a change in ownership.

An aspect that needs further attention in Fanon's and Freire's analyses is a more nuanced understanding of oppression. This is one of the contributions of feminist theory and theology. Authors such as Ivone Gebara and bell hooks point out that the lines between oppressor and oppressed are not always as clearly delineated as Fanon and Freire describe. In some situations, a person can be privileged while in other situations, they may be discriminated (Hooks 2015). In the complex web of power, there are intersections of oppression and privilege. Navigating and negotiating these different realms and levels requires awareness of the power dynamics themselves and the honesty needed to assess one's own role in them.

But a colonized mindset often prevents this critical approach, including assessing the role that religion itself – and Christianity in particular – plays in theologically justifying social stratification, including the enslavement of indigenous and African peoples. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the model of Christendom extended the colonial power of Iberian countries while also expanding the rule of the Roman Catholic church in the new lands. The model adopted by the Roman Catholic church, prior to the Second Vatican Council, was one of tacit agreement with colonial oligarchies. In terms of ethical deliberation, it was the church that decided on behalf of its members what constituted a morally correct way of life. Protestant churches were late arrivals to the continent, but they largely complied with the status quo and left ethical decisions for the individuals to make, granted that they were biblically sound. A more recent phenomenon is the growth of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches. While there are exceptions, the majority of these churches have individual pastors or bishops promulgating a list of dos and don'ts (rooted in biblical literalism) while prominently featuring prosperity theology and praise worship.

The description of these different traditions is an over-simplification, but its function is to illustrate the role religion played in the past and continues to play in the present. While the historical symbiotic relationship between Church and State served to pacify indigenous and enslaved peoples and justify socio-economic exploitation, the advent of contextual theologies (such as liberation, feminist, black, womanist, indigenous and queer, among others)

uses religious discourse and practice to empower those who are disenfranchised. These liberation theologies emphasize agency, the role of people and communities vis-à-vis a colonial mentality. They relate to what Paulo Freire described as consciousness, the awareness of one's place in the world and the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it.

There is no authentic change in the way we treat each other and the environment if there is not also a change in our way of thinking. Thus, the second challenge for scholars involved with the teaching and practice of theology is how to foment and embolden these initiatives of consciousness raising. Is it possible to draw from the memories of colonialism and identify their current effects (through neoliberal politics or economics, for instance) upon human beings and the environment? How can this awareness create greater ecological consciousness, helping individuals and communities see beyond immediate financial rewards on to the wellbeing of future generations? How can religion – and Christianity in particular – be a catalyst for change?

### **The interplay between colonialism, environmental degradation and unsustainable practices**

Sustainability is defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987). While sustainability tends to focus on the interplay between profit, planet, and people, I would like to draw on the concept of *buen vivir* that is rooted in the worldview of the Quechua peoples of the Andes, *sumak kawsay*. It describes a way of doing things that is community-centric, ecologically-balanced and culturally-sensitive. Eduardo Gudynas explains that *buen vivir* is an unfolding philosophy. It describes “a way of life and a form of development that sees social, cultural, environmental and economic issues working together and in balance, not separately and hierarchically as at present” (Balch 2013). Latin American theologians have been attuned to this, particularly within the CETELA and Aby Ayala networks. In many of his books, Leonardo Boff refers to these initiatives, while also pointing out the connection between social inequalities and the impact this has upon escalating natural destruction (Boff 1995). Ecofeminism, too, has articulated this holistic perspective (Gebara 2002).

These environmentally-conscious approaches point out the limits of current development models and the strain left on the environment and its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they postulate that theologies that reinforce dichotomies between body and soul, reality and eschatology, creation and the divine, individual interests and collective needs also must be critically evaluated. Environmental degradation affects plants, animals, soil, water, and people.<sup>6</sup> Taking the case of illegal mining in the Brazilian Amazon – known as *garimpo* – for instance, one can easily see its impact in a broader sense, involving deforestation, the pollution of rivers with the dumping of mercury, the trade in drugs and arms, alcohol, prostitution, and human trafficking. It has negative impact on forest communities as well as the natural habitat.<sup>7</sup> A map of illegal mining in the Amazon, released in December of 2018, shows the scale of pollution and damage to the environment, but it also offers a window into the world of crime that mining creates.<sup>8</sup> The environmental crisis requires a theological response, calling churches and communities of faith to denounce environmental abuses and stand by those who are most deeply affected.

This theological approach requires that scholars and activists be well informed. Modern colonialism (also called neoliberalism) does more than extract goods and wealth from a conquered country – it restructures economies, drawing individuals and communities into a tangled web involving the flow of human and natural resources. It impacts the most vulnerable, such as indigenous populations, since they are seen as an impediment to progress.<sup>9</sup> This interconnection between natural exploitation and its detrimental effects can also be illustrated in historical terms, between colonized and colonial countries, when slaves were trafficked from Africa to the

5 For further reading on the effects of mining – also small scale – in the Amazon area see the following article: Phillips 2018 and Phillips 2019b.

6 Seen as lucrative, but mining towns are often the last resort for people without other options: “There was no authority, there was prostitution, hired killings, [forced] disappearances and people trafficking... There was every kind of illicit business and all types of crimes with a lot of female victims, including minors” (Collins 2019).

7 Data on deforestation can be found at: Carrington 2019.

8 The effect of illegal mining and its environmental impact is further analyzed in this essay: Phillips 2018.

9 The painful results of deforestation are noted among indigenous populations: Phillips 2019a.



Americas, West Indian plantations produced sugar for consumption in Europe, and raw cotton was moved from India to be manufactured into cloth in England and then sold back to India. In whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, “the profits always flowed back into the so-called ‘mother country’” (Loomba 1998, 3–4)<sup>10</sup>.

Nowadays, international capital bypasses “countries” (which are often seen as burdens because of taxation and environmental regulations) by creating supra-national conglomerates that continue the pattern of colonial exploitation. The end result is that, in the name of a free market, profit is extracted and is not reinvested locally, while the social and environmental responsibility for clean-ups and treatment of diseases, among other problems, falls on local populations. The outcome is that the most vulnerable are left to fend for their own survival.<sup>11</sup> This environmental injustice is also a theological problem, as certain communities (particularly poor, indigenous, and people of color) are disproportionately exposed to pollution and its effects on health and environment with unequal protection and access to the laws, regulations, and governmental programs to ensure their wellbeing.

The intersection between profit, people, and planet requires a careful balance – and that is at the basis of sustainability (Watts 2019). The focus of sustainability is to save natural resources and the human environment while also preventing deterioration of economic and social development.<sup>12</sup> The United Nations correctly identified that environmental problems were global in nature and that it was in the common interests of all nations to establish policies for sustainable development, including policies regarding carbon emissions to reduce greenhouse effect. The Paris Agreement, for in-

stance, signed in 2016, is a global response to the threat of climate change. This careful balance between the wellbeing of the planet and its inhabitants requires ethical reflection and deliberation, a task for which scholars involved with the teaching and practice of theology are well equipped to address.

Sustainability – that the needs of the present can be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – is an invitation for action and reflection. It requires that empathy and compassion be extended not only to our current generation (whom we see) but also to future generations (whom we do not yet see). This echoes Jesus’ own words (1 John 4: 20-21), proclaiming love towards all of God’s children, whether they be near or far.<sup>13</sup> In a time in which immediate rewards trump future benefits and ostentation of material goods surpasses the wellbeing of the *oikos*, there is needed for a profound reflection on humanity’s purpose and reason to be. In this, religious communities are vital agents of transformation. Already in the 1970s the World Council of Churches (WCC) articulated the need for broad paradigms to tackle environmental degradation and socio-economic disparities. In its 1983 assembly in Vancouver, the WCC encouraged member churches to address environmental concerns as part of a common effort to promote Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (known as the JPIC process) (Deifelt 2016).

Our fixation with immediacy affects how we think sustainably about the resources needed by future generations (and how they are impacted by deforestation, water management, the use of pesticides in our foods, etc.) as well as our relationship to other human beings. It demands that we also address the *us* in sustainability, i. e., the human component of it and how it relates to decoloniality. I do not want to rehash a sensationalistic approach to sustainability and ecology – sometimes broadcasted as climate change sending people to therapy (Tsjeng 2019). Indeed, many people feel overwhelmed and paralyzed because there is so much to be done. But while it is true that nobody can address everything that jeop-

10 Loomba’s argument is that the flow worked in both directions: slaves and indentured labor as well as raw materials were transported to manufacture goods in the metropolis, or in other locations for metropolitan consumption, but the colonies also provided captive markets for European goods.

11 The plight of the urban poor, for instance, is exemplified by the population living on top of garbage without access to sanitation or safe drinking water: Cancian and Ladeira 2019.

12 The foundational work on this is the Brundtland Report, which can be downloaded as a copy of the UN General Assembly document A/42/427: [https://sswm.info/sites/default/files/reference\\_attachments/UN%20WCED%201987%20Brundtland%20Report.pdf](https://sswm.info/sites/default/files/reference_attachments/UN%20WCED%201987%20Brundtland%20Report.pdf).

13 1 John 4:20-21: “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (New Revised Standard Version).

ardizes the life of the planet, it is equally true that everybody can do something to promote life and its flourishing. Sometimes, it is more manageable to focus on a particular facet of a current issue and from there reflect on its causes and effects on a broader scale. This interlinking and overlapping approach is called intersectionality.

Kimberlé W. Crenshaw introduced the term *intersectionality* to address the marginalization of black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics (Crenshaw 1991). Since then, the theory and practice of intersectionality has generated the kind of interdisciplinary and global engagement that also characterizes the work done by theologians, scholars, and practitioners. Human experiences are intersectional, and intersectional experiences are greater than the sum of racism and sexism and classism and ageism or speciesism. The notion of intersectionality helps us better understand the human experience – the particular and complex manner in which colonialism has subordinated peoples and communities – and it can also help us better assess our impact on the planet and envision sustainable solutions.

Modern slavery is a good example of how multiple issues intersect. A recent report in *The Guardian* exposed the state of slavery in the 21st century (Hodal 2019). According to research compiled by the International Labor Organization (ILO), more people are enslaved today than any other time in history: one in 200 people is enslaved. While there were around 13 million people captured and sold in the transatlantic slave trade, today an estimated 40.3 million people are living under some form of slavery. What constitutes slavery? Being forced to work against one's will, being owned or controlled by an "employer" (exploiter), having limited freedom of movement, being treated as a commodity, or bought and sold as property. Women and girls make up 71 % of modern slavery victims; children comprise 25 % (circa 10 million).

Enslavement means being dehumanized. It is the denial of one's human rights and fulfillment of basic needs. Whether the means of enslavement is human trafficking or forced marriage, migration or threats of deportation, it is also deeply intertwined with other issues: incapacity to farm because of climate change, scarce resources to maintain family livelihoods, gender gaps in accessing education or jobs, and a growing divide between haves and have-nots. It is undeniable that modern slavery is a profitable

business: "A forced laborer generates roughly \$ 8,000 in annual profit for their exploiter, while sex traffickers earn an average of \$36,000 per victim" (Hodal 2019). It is estimated that modern slavery generates \$150 billion in profits per year.<sup>14</sup> Human lives are commodified and the wellbeing of the planet jeopardized in order to generate revenues.

Vitor Westhelle once explained the effect colonialism has on its people by paraphrasing the famous Brazilian saying "There is no sin South of the Equator." He addressed sin and suffering in the Latin American context by deconstructing the mentality of objectification and idealization that is superimposed onto the land and its people. The continent was invented so that it could be discovered, he argued. Its possibilities are given within the constraints of the known and the imagined, as voyagers who claim to discover something that has always been there. The concept of sin, in Latin America, is a "a plea to abandon an imaginary paradise for a real life of risk and danger, or, perhaps better said, be a plea to leave hell imposed by a fantastic hope. But this hope can only be named by the voice of a people who knows and tells the story of their mistakes, their vileness, and their fall." (Westhelle 1998, 248–249). Besides the abuse of human rights and environmental mismanagement, to justify the sacrifice of life and land on behalf of progress is a sin that demands action.

A defeatist stance might argue that it is impossible to tackle this structural sin; that it is our human predicament and our propensity for wrongdoing. Modern slavery and deforestation are reduced to current expressions of humanity's original sin. But perhaps this despondent state of mind itself constitutes an example of coloniality. As Fanon stated, "In order to assimilate the culture of the oppressor and venture into his fold, the colonized subject has had to pawn some of his own intellectual possessions." (Fanon 1963, 13)<sup>15</sup>. The colonial mentality is so per-

14 The International Labor Organization presents comprehensive statistics on the nature and scope of forced labor. See <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/statistics/lang-en/index.htm>.

15 "The choice concerning violence that the colonized native must make, in Fanon's view, is between continuing to accept it—absorbing the abuse or displacing it upon other members of the oppressed native community—or taking this foreign violence and throwing it back in the face of those who initiated it. Fanon's consistent existentialist commitment to choosing one's character through





vasively incorporated among subaltern peoples that they believe nothing can be done to alter current affairs. They see others, who are similarly oppressed, as either a competition and threat to the little gains they have made (where they fight over the crumbs falling from the table) or they use their status and privilege to ensure that they too can exercise a modicum of power by diminishing others (exemplified by the multiple configurations of perceived hierarchy of white folk in relation to indigenous peoples, colored people vis-à-vis blacks, or economically poor men exerting dominion over the women in their own class). The outcome is that somebody is always worse off, prone to stigmatization, or deserving of their lot. Theologians would agree that oppressed and colonized people turning against each other, exerting violence and dehumanization, is an expression of original sin. A decolonial approach would go further and say that these abuses are a sin against our origins, against the good in creation that God envisions, and the abundant life Jesus proclaimed.

In this context, the final challenge for scholars involved with the teaching and practice of theology is to propagate a message of transformative hope and solidarity. An alternative to the construction of social and economic “others” is an intersectional approach in which differences are not used to discriminate, but rather to build coalitions of mutual empowerment and advocacy (Deifelt 2015). Can our theological endeavors create greater awareness about other people’s plights, their struggles and hopes? Likewise, can it foster common initiatives and activities that promote the type of life together that is at the core of *buen vivir*, where the wellbeing of creatures and creation alike are ensured? Can we imagine and work towards a time and place in which human ability can transform us and the world into a household of hospitality and care for the entire creation? I hope so and trust that, together, we can envisage and strive for this to become reality. As Desmond Tutu so wisely said, “What is the quality of life on our planet? It is nothing more than the sum of our interactions. Each kindness enhances the quality of life. Each cruelty diminishes it” (Tutu 2011, 7).

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one’s actions means that decolonization can only happen when the native takes up his or her responsible subjecthood and refuses to occupy the position of violence-absorbing passive victim” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Frantz Fanon”).

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