

Is a Decolonialized Roman Catholic Homily in the U.S. Possible?: Beyond Postcolonial Preaching

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Abstract: This paper juxtaposes decolonial thinking with contemporary Roman Catholic homilizing. The fundamental question that undergirds this exploration is whether a decolonialized Roman Catholic homily is even possible in the U.S. Since more preachers and theologians are familiar with postcolonial theory rather than decolonial thinking, the first step in this exploration is to define postcolonial practice and theory – as much as that is possible – and illustrate how it has been employed in recent theorizing about preaching as well as highlight some of its limits. After a necessary autobiographical excursus to locate the author in this discussion, we then turn to an exploration of the nature of decoloniality and a consideration of the nature of Roman Catholic homilizing. Finally, we will propose four specific homiletic lenses and strategies that could contribute to a more decolonialized path to Roman Catholic Homiletics. At the same time, there is a recognition that, given Roman Catholic canon law about homilizing, authentic decolonialized preaching in this context is virtually impossible.

Keywords: Decolonialized Preaching • Postcolonial Theory • Homiletics

Introduction

Postcolonial is a sprawling category that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. While not explicitly claiming that moniker, the field first surfaced through the genre of literary fiction. Novels such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* helped pave the way for this unique approach in the late 1950's.¹ The emergence of

¹ One of the first widely available editions of this book is: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) online at https://www.centralschool.edu.vu/uploads/1/1/4/4/114402701/things-fall-apart.pdf?trk=article-ssr-frontend-pulse_little-text-block; another important early work in postcolonial fiction is Tayeb Sālih, *Mawsim*

postcolonial theorizing soon followed. Some root the origins of such theory in Frantz Fanon's 1961 *Les Damnés de la Terre*² while others elect Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism* as the originator of this theory.³ Other canonical figures in the emergence of postcolonial theorizing are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁴ and Homi Bhabha.⁵ The 1989 publication *The Empire Writes Back* consolidated much of postcolonial thought of the time and was enormously influential to its growing influence in various academies.⁶

The intersection between postcolonial theory and theology first occurred through biblical criticism: a logical entrée point given the origins of the postcolonial movement in literary explorations. An early review of the field by Lazare Rukundwa suggests that the turn to postcolonial biblical interpretation was part of a cautious path undertaken by some biblical scholars to explore "a political hermeneutical avenue."⁷ This road traversed post-structural theory, postmodern theory, and feminist readings already in the early to mid-1990's. In the middle of that decade, Rasiah Sugirtharajah – who had

al-Hijrah ilâ al-Shamâl (Season of Migration to the North). Beirut, 1966/2015. The English version is online at <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/510517>.

² Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1961); first published in English as *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁷ Lazare S. Rukundwa, "Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading," *HTS Theological Studies*, 64, no.1 (2008) 339-351.

previously published on the need for interpreting the bible from the perspective of “the third world”⁸ – was arguing that, distinctive from “anti-colonial” readings of the bible, postcolonial readings are different in multiple ways. These include 1) not being locked into the colonial paradigm where colonialists set the ground rules, 2) it concedes the complexity of contact between the invader and invaded, and 3) it goes beyond the binary notions of colonized and colonizer and lays weighty emphasis on critical exchanges and mutual transformation.⁹

Biblical exegesis is a critical tool for many preachers – especially those whose tradition presumes or dictates that preaching must be rooted in biblical texts. Thus, for many Christians, particularly those who hold for a *sola scriptura* foundation of faith and worship,¹⁰ preaching is deeply linked with biblical preaching. It is not surprising, therefore, that the growing prominence of many leading exegetes and preachers who themselves represented some subaltern group or were advocates for them (sometimes their students) nurtured an interest in sermonizing in a post-colonial mode. A notable pioneer here is the Cuban American biblical scholar Fernando

⁸ Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); also his “Textual Cleansing: A Move from the Colonial to the Postcolonial Version,” *Semeia* 76 (1996): 7-19.

⁹ Ibid., “A Brief Memorandum on Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 21, no. 73 (1999), 3-5.

¹⁰ See the rich discussion of this concept in Hans Burger, et al., *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*. Volume 32 of *Studies in Reformed Theology*. Leiden: Brill, 2018. As will be discussed below, Roman Catholic preaching as dogmatically defined is neither “biblical” in the strict sense, nor even confined to the appointed lectionary readings of the day.

Sevogia¹¹ who directed the doctoral work of the influential Botswanan feminist theologian Musa W. Dube Shomanah.¹²

As preaching is first an event which eventually birthed homiletic theory, the history of postcolonial preaching – while possible to sample – is an elusive history yet to be written. The theoretical reflections on postcolonial preaching are a little easier to trace but still ambiguous. Preaching is considered by many to be a theological act,¹³ an integral part of worship,¹⁴ and intimately related to other pastoral practices.¹⁵ Thus, while explicit reflections on preaching in postcolonial mode are more recent, there are earlier writings implicitly linked to such preaching. Besides the previously noted works of biblical criticism through a postcolonial lens, these include works in historical theology,¹⁶ postcolonial theologizing,¹⁷ considerations of

¹¹ Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

¹² Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

¹³ See, for example, Ronald J. Allen, *Thinking Theologically: The Preacher as Theologian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

¹⁴ See my “The Homily,” in *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 156-165.

¹⁵ See, for example, Theo Pleizier, “The soul in Preaching,” *Religions* 15, no.4 (2024) <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/15/4/446>

¹⁶ An early example is Joel W. Martin “Indians, Contact, and Colonialism in the Deep South: Themes for a Postcolonial History of American Religion,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 149–180.

¹⁷ Pioneering examples include Mario Aguilar, “Postcolonial African Theology in Kabasele Lumbala,” *Theological Studies* 63, no.2 (May 2002) 302–23; Susan Abraham, “The Caress of the Doer of the Word,” *Philosophy and Theology* 16, no.1 (2004): 115-129, as well as her “Karl Rahner’s Theology of Freedom in a Postcolonial Context,” *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no.1 (2004); Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, Mayra Rivera, “Introduction: Alien/nation,

worship through postcolonial frames¹⁸ and related ministerial disciplines such as pastoral theology, and pastoral care and counseling refracted through this refreshing optic.¹⁹

Liberation, and the Postcolonial Underground,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press (2004), pp. 1–19; Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Emmanuel Lartey, *Postcolonializing God* (London: SCM Press, 2006); Edward P Antonio, ed., *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Susan Abraham, *Identity, Ethics, and Nonviolence in Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007); Héctor E. López-Sierra, “Towards a Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Postcolonial, Macro-ecumenical, and Trans-pastoral Practical Theological Method,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 17, no.2 (2007) 57-81.

¹⁸ Early examples include: George Olusola Ajibade, “New Wine in Old Cups: Postcolonial Performance of Christian Music in Yorùbá Land,” *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no.2 (2007) 105-126; Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns. “Liturgical Studies and Christian Worship: The Postcolonial Challenge,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 5, no.1 (2007) 39–62; Emmanuel Lartey, “Postcolonial African Practical Theology: Rituals of Remembrance, Cleansing, Healing, and Re-connection,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 21, no.2 (2011): 1–16.

¹⁹ For example, Tapiwa N. Mucherera, *Meet Me at the Palaver: Narrative Pastoral Counselling in Postcolonial Contexts* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010); Melinda McGarrah Sharp, *Misunderstanding Stories: Toward a Postcolonial Pastoral Theology* (Eugene Or: Pickwick, 2013); M. Fulgence Nyengele, “Cultivating Ubuntu: An African postcolonial pastoral theological engagement with positive psychology,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 24, no.2 (2014) 4-1-4–35 doi: 10.1179/jpt.2014.24.2.00; H.-K. Heidi Park, “Toward a pastoral theological phenomenology: Constructing a reflexive and relational phenomenological method from a postcolonial perspective,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 24, no.1 (2014) 3-1-3–21. doi: 10.1179/jpt.2014.24.1.003; Melinda McGarrah Sharp, *Creating Resistances: Pastoral Care in a Postcolonial World* (Leiden: Brill: 2019); Emmanuel Lartey and Hellen Moon, ed., *Postcolonial Images of Spiritual Care: Challenges of Care in a Neoliberal Age* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020).

Postcolonial preaching and its limits

Christian preaching originated as an event. It was only after a significant gestation period that this ubiquitous early church praxis eventually gave birth to intentional theologies of preaching. The historical foundation for this assertion lies in the fact that preaching by the followers of Jesus – who himself brought about a revolution in perceiving God’s reign through his preaching – existed even before the evolution of the New Testament²⁰ and both fueled and paralleled the emergence of that body of writings as well as Christianity itself. On the other hand, the first explicit Christian theology of preaching is attributed to St. Augustine (d. 430),²¹ in particular his *De Doctrina Christiana*.²²

Theologies of preaching – which especially blossomed in the 16th century in the West²³ – are not a dispensable addendum to this central ministerial act. As David Tracy has pointedly recognized: all praxis is theory laden.²⁴ Thus, it is incumbent upon preachers as reflective

²⁰ See vãnThanh Nguyễn, “Preaching in the New Testament,” in *Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 41-50.

²¹ The first scholarly work on Augustine’s theology of preaching appears to be the dissertation by David Randolph, “Augustine’s Theology of Preaching,” Ph.D. dissertation (Boston University, 1962).

²² Especially book 4; though the “*Christanus orator*” could be understood some places in this chapter as “teacher,” Augustine explicitly references *praedicatio* over a dozen times: https://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina_cristiana/index2.htm

²³ See the fine overview of this period in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Vol. 4: The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); I am grateful to colleague Craig Satterlee for this reference.

²⁴ David Tracy, “The Foundations of Practical Theology,” *Practical Theology*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 61.

practitioners to excavate and evaluate the often unspoken presuppositions and latent theories foundation to our preaching. Part of that process is juxtaposing our preferred praxis and theories of preaching with other models in a dialogue of mutual critique. Such is essential so that our preaching does not become marooned in the rut of an unexamined word.

Postcolonial theory is establishing itself as a powerful and provocative dialogue partner with contemporary theologies of worship and its preaching. In the fall of 2014, for example, Boston University's Center for Practical Theology hosted a consultation on "Preaching and Postcolonial Theology," subsequently published in the online journal *Homiletic*.²⁵ More specifically, Sarah Travis argues that a postcolonial approach to preaching contributes to deconstructing the "empires" which perdure today in a variety of social and religious modes.²⁶ It alternately introduces ambivalence and ambiguity: fundamentally important when pondering the mystery of God.²⁷ Decolonized preaching opens a third space – an imaginary that is essential for ensuring that the meaning of symbols and culture can be reappropriated, translated, and read anew.²⁸ Travis imaginatively juxtaposes this third space with that foundational triplex of Christian belief: the Trinity. Her employment of social Trinitarian theologies introduces a discourse that contradicts that of colonialism while nurturing more respectful and life-giving relationship within and beyond the church.

Puerto Rican theologian Pablo Jiménez pushes in the same direction as Travis, but with more of an edge. Characterizing postcolonial preaching as befriending the

²⁵ <https://www.homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/issue/view/200>

²⁶ Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene, Or: Pickwick, 2014), p. 5 *et passim*.

²⁷ Travis, pp. 128-9 *et passim*.

²⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 37.

troublemaker Jesus, he believes postcolonial preachers must “unmask and deconstruct the colonial ideology that keeps the subaltern groups bound in silence.”²⁹ This exercise by its very nature is conflictual, which Jiménez believes is an unavoidable element of this process.

Practical theologian HyeRan Kim-Cragg³⁰ believes that postcolonial perspectives can help recognize and interrupt colonizing discourse. Notably her approach, different from others, is itself a postcolonial experiment. “Ripple” is the evocative metaphor that permeates this work: historically apt for a work written in a period of heightened liquidity³¹ that rejects linear thinking,³² and underscores the relationality and interdependence³³ between the six ripples she highlights.³⁴ Her repeated deployment of the image of rehearsal (e.g., postcolonial preaching is a rehearsal of spatial plurality) as a metaphor for disrupting the dominant narratives that

²⁹ See his “The Troublemaker’s Friend: From Text to Sermon in a Postcolonial Context,” *Apuntes* 34, no.3 (2014), 85.

³⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a ripple effect* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2021).

³¹ The Polish sociologist-philosopher Zygmunt Bauman famously deemed the new millennium a time of *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); a decade earlier, anticipating the work of some postmodern theorists, he underscore the ambiguity of the age in his *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

³² See a balanced overview of linearity by Christopher Hutton, “From Acoustic Space to the Global Village: Linearity and the Western Intellectual Imagination,” in *Rethinking Humanity after Western Universalism/Penser l’humanité après l’universalisme occidental*, ed. Markus Missling and Jonas Tinius, 75-90 (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2023); online at <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/76894/1/9783110798494.pdf#page=88>

³³ This is an aspect she previously explored in her *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

³⁴ Employing RIPPLE as an acronym, these are: Rehearsal, Imagination, Place, Pattern, Language, and Exegesis.

continue to wash over us is quite dynamic. Rehearsal here is not simply a repetition of salvation history or scriptural texts but rather is an apocalyptic exercise that casts us into an arc towards the “Kin-dom” of God. She believes it is incumbent that every preacher in the 21st century needs to be a postcolonial preacher, especially because the Christian churches have so often been complicit with colonialism.³⁵

Without in anyway diminishing the contributions of postcolonial thought to contemporary homiletics, every framework has its limitations and alone is inadequate for framing the mystery of holy revelation and God’s Word. It is not surprising, therefore, that many who promote postcolonial theory in service of theology and ministry also recognize its challenges and limitations.³⁶ Early in her publishing on the topic, postcolonial theologian Susan Abraham noted that:

Postcolonial theory is ... famously opaque and difficult to read, because it weaves together multiple strands of Western theoretical perspectives economic, political, cultural, philosophical, and literary in order to reconceive postcolonial spatialities and temporalities. The difficulty of reading postcolonial theory to glean approximations for interdisciplinary thought leads many either to read postcolonial theory selectively or to abandon it as unintelligible. Lastly, the self-reflexive imperative of postcolonial theory presents us with a field that does not possess any predictable, unified structure.³⁷

³⁵ Kim-Cragg, pp. 22, 106 and 118, respectively.

³⁶ An early critique is from Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the term ‘Postcolonial,’” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992) 84-98.

³⁷ Susan Abraham, “What does Mumbai have to do with Rome? Postcolonial Perspectives on Globalization and Theology,” *Theological Studies* 69, no.2 (2008) 378.

Similarly, Sarah Travis, while promoting preaching in a postcolonial mode, recognizes that “the literature is as complex as the problems it seeks to address.”³⁸ She expatiates:

Postcolonial theory’s conceptual vocabulary is itself a site of continuing negotiation. Scholars from a range of social locations debate the meanings of key terms, resulting in ever-evolving and somewhat unstable definitions. Given the nature and purpose of postcolonial debate, it is unwise, if not impossible, to grant absolute authority to any particular or narrow definition. This multidimensionality allows for creativity and variety of opinion, yet it often results in prose that is almost incomprehensible. Postcolonial theory in general is not particularly useful for busy preachers who do not have the time or the inclination to participate in what is essentially an endless debate unless the theory is distilled and interpreted.³⁹

An autobiographical excursus

As a Caucasian male cleric, raised in the Midwest who was privileged with a quality education and economic security, my first ministerial assignment to the largest Roman Catholic Women’s college in the country was eye-opening. While exposed to liberal theologies in the early 1970’s, I was unprepared for the transcultural immersion that confronted me in 1975 at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota which proudly advertised itself as the school “Where every year is the year of the woman!”

Subsequent studies in Germany and France, where I never achieved real language fluency, were also humbling. My Danish *Doktor Vater* created a dissertation

³⁸ Travis, p. 72.

³⁹ Travis, p. 86.

topic that required me to move to Paris because, as he often said, “you Americans think the world revolves around you.” France under the socialist president François Mitterrand while Ronald Regan was president of the United States was not a comfortable place for this linguistically challenged student from mid-America. I confess to sewing a Canadian flag to my backpack and regularly admitting to being a Canadian student *qui parlait très mal Français*.

Upon my return to the States I accepted a position at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago where my cross-cultural education exploded. Every class was like a meeting of the United Nations: one seminar for our professional doctoral students was populated by 27 folk from 18 countries. I regularly taught worship practica for ordination candidates who spoke English as a third or fourth language. This was not only the equivalent of cultural shock therapy but also an intensive in granularity. One memorable seminar in practical theology included three Ghanaians. In a discussion about the interrelationship between theology and economics, one of this trinity began his presentation by baldly stating “In my country ...”; that was as far as he got. The other two compatriots immediately challenged his perspective as the privileged viewpoint of someone well heeled, well-educated and well positioned who had spent his whole life in the capitol city of Acra. The others were from marginalized rural areas, whose parents were farmers not diplomats, coming from not only a very different social and economic slice of the population, but were educated in an entirely distinctive linguistic terrain.

My deeply imbedded western philosophical and theological categories were soon exposed as inadequate for eliciting wisdom from my students who became my teachers. Wise colleagues tutored me in new frameworks

including: local theologies and hybridity from Robert Schreiter,⁴⁰ contextual theology from Stephen Bevans,⁴¹ feminist exegesis and the new cosmology from Dianne Bergant,⁴² global Christianity from Roger Schroeder,⁴³ Latino world views from Gary Riebe-Estrella,⁴⁴ and decoloniality from Michel Andraos.⁴⁵ Our celebrated graduate Susan Abraham introduced me to postcolonial thinking.

As a practical theologian I have alternately drawn upon the insights and methods from all of these, finding each helpful in addressing various issues and topics. More recently, the 2019 meeting of the International Academy of Practical Theology in São Leopoldo, Brazil on “(De)coloniality and Religious Practices,” prompted me to make a deeper dive into decoloniality and to read the praxis of worship and preaching through that optic.⁴⁶ This exploration is another step in my attempts to respect voices that have been marginalized in the liturgical arenas in my own Roman Catholic tradition and to throw another metaphorical stone into the

⁴⁰ See his *Constructing Local Theologies* published in my first year at CTU (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985); also, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and Local* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997).

⁴¹ Especially his *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1992), the revised and expanded edition appearing in 2002.

⁴² See her distilled perspectives in *A New Heaven, a New Earth: Catholicity in an evolving Universe* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2016).

⁴³ His summative work here is *Christian Tradition in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2021).

⁴⁴ See the work he edited with Timothy Matovina, *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Michel Andraos, ed., *The Church and Indigenous Peoples in the Americas: In between Reconciliation and Decolonization* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

⁴⁶ E.g., my “Liturgical Inculturation: Decolonization or Decolonialization? Examining *Misa ng Bayang Pilipino*,” *Asian Journal of Theology* 35, no.1 (2021) 83-99.

baptismal pool in order to discern what grace or malpractice it might reveal.

Decoloniality: A new homiletic ripple

Moments and movements are difficult to define. Decoloniality, alternately considered moment and movement is no exception.⁴⁷ One helpful step may be to distinguish as much as possible between the frameworks of coloniality-decoloniality from those of colonial-postcolonial. To begin with, leading figures in the field do not consider decoloniality a theory or mode of critical thought as much as it is “a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice and praxis.”⁴⁸ Continuing in that mode, semiotician Walter Mignolo distinguishes decolonial *thinking* from postcolonial *theory* genealogically: the latter located in French post-structuralism, the former in “the dense history of planetary decolonial thinking.”⁴⁹ Britta Saal elucidates:

While postcolonial critique undertakes an extension of Foucault, Gramsci, Derrida, and Lacan, while it realizes the problem of Orientalism (Said) and finally departs in its reflections from the postcolonial situation in India, decolonial critique has its roots in Latin America. It is based on approaches by critics of

⁴⁷ Thinandavha Masha considers it an “epistemological and political movement”; see his “Unshackling the chains of coloniality: Reimagining decoloniality, Africanisation and Reformation for a non-racial South Africa, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no.3 (2018) 4920, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4920>.

⁴⁸ Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

⁴⁹ Walter Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option,” *Transmodernity* (Fall 2011): 44-65, here 45.

Eurocentrism like José Carlos Mariátegui, on dependency theory, and on liberation philosophy.⁵⁰

Sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel believes a key difference between the two pivots around the presence or absence of a colonial administration. Colonialism refers to situations “enforced by the presence of a colonial administration.” Coloniality, on the other hand, continues “in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system.”⁵¹

Sociologist Anibal Quijano critically positioned decoloniality epistemically to counter what he considered the coloniality of knowledge and subsequent epistemicides:⁵²

In the beginning colonialism was a product of a systematic repression The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification.... It was followed by the imposition of the use of the ruler’s own patterns of

⁵⁰ Britta Saal, “How to Leave Modernity Behind: The Relationship Between Colonialism and Enlightenment, and the Possibility of Altermodern Decoloniality,” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 17, no.1 (2013) 49-80, here 62.

⁵¹ Ramón Grosfoguel, “La Descolonización de la Economía y los Estudios Postcoloniales: Transmodernidad, pensamiento fronterizo y colonialidad global,” *Tabula Rasa* 48 (2006) 17-48; translated online as “Decolonizing Political Economy and Postcolonial Studies: Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality,” <https://www.eurozine.com/transmodernity-border-thinking-and-global-coloniality/>

⁵² Ramón Grosfoguel explores this concept in his “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no.1 (2013) 73-90.

expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural.⁵³

Thus, while coloniality is concerned with exploitation, it places particular emphasis on the production of subjectivities and knowledge. The antidote to the latter is the development of what is sometimes characterized as “border epistemologies.”⁵⁴

Parallel to Grosfoguel’s defining colonialism by political control of people, land or resources by “foreign” administration, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang emphasize that decolonization is not a metaphor. They reject “colonial equivocation” or “the vague equating of colonialisms that erase the sweeping scope of land as the basis of wealth, power, [and] law in settler nation-states.”⁵⁵ They challenge Frantz Fanon and others who believe that “decolonizing the mind is the first step ... toward overthrowing colonial regimes.”⁵⁶ While appreciating the contribution of critical consciousness, they believe frontloading critical consciousness building can waylay decolonization. “Until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism.”⁵⁷

David Tracy notes that a current theological challenge is that useful traditional distinctions – such as feeling and thought, form and content, theory and

⁵³ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007) 169.

⁵⁴ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Implications of Subaltern Epistemologies for Global Capitalism: Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality,” in *Critical Globalization Studies*, ed. Richard P. Appelbaum and William I. Robinson (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 283-293.

⁵⁵ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no.1 (2012) 18.

⁵⁶ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 18.

⁵⁷ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 18.

practice – have become “fatal separations.”⁵⁸ While I am not proposing a fatal separation between postcolonial and decolonial theory, a credible though not impervious distinction between the two is the latter’s epistemic emphasis on honoring boundary knowledge rather than the former’s historical focus on the recovery of control of physical or political resources. Thus, Mignolo has notably deemed decoloniality as a form of “epistemic disobedience”⁵⁹ and cognitive “delinking” from Eurocentric patterns of thought.⁶⁰ He goes on to advocate for what he labels “border gnosis,” i.e., a form of post-occidental, subaltern reasoning formed at the margins of Western modernity.⁶¹

Similarly, as his thought developed over the decades, Quijano came to consider the decolonial project as an “epistemological reconstitution” in the face of an enduring and pervasive coloniality of power.⁶² This reconstitution is framed within “the intellectual necessity of the idea of totality.” Quijano argues that the European Enlightenment produced a reductionistic vision of reality⁶³ in which only European culture is rational and universal; other cultures are not “subjects” of knowledge and culture but only “objects” of knowledge and culture and thus eliminated from an authentic social

⁵⁸ David Tracy, “Theological Table Talk: Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (1998): 235-241.

⁵⁹ See note 48 above.

⁶⁰ Walter Mignolo, “DeLinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (2007) 449-514

⁶¹ These ideas are explored and expanded throughout his *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), but especially the first two chapters: “Border Thinking and the Colonial Difference” (49-90), and “Post-Occidental Reason” (91-126).

⁶² Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 176.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 173.

totality.⁶⁴ In contrast, Quijano conceives of social existence as a multidimensional totality that maintains its integrity by constantly being contested – especially from the margins. This is in support of a planetary critical consciousness that promotes not universality but “pluri-versality.”⁶⁵

Given this epistemic even linguistic vector so prominent in decolonial thinking – some have even attempted to outline a “grammar of decolonial thinking”⁶⁶ – the decolonial lens may be more accessible for preachers steeped in the dynamics of rhetoric, grammar, and linguistics. Unlike Prof. Travis, I do not believe that it is incumbent upon every 21st century preacher to be a homilist in decolonial mode. On the other hand, the grammar of decoloniality seems a powerful means for addressing the continued and deepening realities of marginalization and oppression that plague the global village. It also holds the promising of opening up new horizons of the preaching of Jesus in the midst of both political and religious empires. It is that hunch that fuels this exploration.

Roman Catholic homilizing within a benevolent empire

A persistent theme in postcolonial theory is imperialism, often framed through the category of empire. While admitting, along with Travis, that “postcolonial theory’s conceptual vocabulary is itself a

⁶⁴ Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 172.

⁶⁵ Mignolo, “Delinking,” 500.

⁶⁶ This is in partial response to Mignolo’s 2007 question “what is [decoloniality’s] grammar; see, Nick Shepherd, “The Grammar of Decoloniality,” in *Colonial and Decolonial Linguistics: Knowledges and Epistemes*, ed. Ana Deumert, Anne Storch and Nick Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 303-324.

site of continuing negotiation,”⁶⁷ Ronald Suny provides a working definition that suits our purposes. He explains that empire is “a particular form of domination or control between two units set apart in a hierarchical, inequitable relationship ... in which a metropole dominates a periphery to the disadvantage of the periphery.”⁶⁸

While it may seem odd for some to situate Roman Catholic homilizing within some kind of benevolent empire, it seems a justifiable exercise given the restrictions on this practice in Roman Catholicism. The homily is a very specific form of preaching in my tradition. Some of its characteristics⁶⁹ are:

- 1) It is a **liturgical event**, which not only occurs within the context of Eucharist or other official sacramental services but is theologically and canonically understood to be “of” and not simply “in” the liturgy;
- 2) Since the homily is itself a liturgical event and the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that the liturgy is performed by Christ, head and members, then the **assembly with Christ are subjects and not “objects” of the homily**;
- 3) The canonical presumption is that, since the homily is a central liturgical act, it can **only be performed by the ordained** [deacon, priest or bishop] within worship.
- 4) The homily is **rooted in the lectionary**, a unique genre of ecclesial literature once rooted in the bible but at the same time not identical to the bible and thus

⁶⁷ See note 39 above.

⁶⁸ Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Empire Strikes Out Imperial Russia, ‘National’ Identity, and Theories of Empire,” in Ronald Grigor, and Suny Terry Martin (eds), *A State Of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25.

⁶⁹ For a further exploration of these characteristics, see my “Homily,” 161-165.

requires what could be considered a “lectionary hermeneutic;”⁷⁰

- 5) While rooted in the lectionary it is **not confined to lectionary content**. As *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* clarified, the homily is derived from the “sacred text.” This is not a synonym for scripture. As explained in the first official interpretation of the *Constitution*, “A homily on the sacred text means an explanation, pertinent to the mystery celebrated and the special needs of the listeners, of some point in either the readings from sacred Scripture or in another text from the Order or Prayer of the Day’s Mass.”⁷¹
- 6) It is a **rhetorical event**, for just as the liturgy is not a book or text but an experience, so the homily is not merely words on a page but an event. While a prepared text is ordinarily helpful in this form of preaching, properly speaking the homily is not the text but a rhetorical performance. It is a verb, not a noun.

Thus, my definition of a Roman Catholic Homily as:

a ritual conversation between God and the liturgical assembly, that announces God's reign as revealed in Jesus Christ through the mediation of a preacher, who offers a credible and imaginative interpretation for Christian living, in dialogue with the lives of the faithful, that draws upon the whole of the liturgy—especially the lectionary texts—in the context of a particular community at a prescribed moment of their shared life.

All preaching, like all theology,⁷² is contextual. However, given the canonical directives for Roman

⁷⁰ See Dianne Bergant with Richard Fragomeni, *Preaching the New Lectionary*. Vol. 1: Year A. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), vii et passim.

⁷¹ *Inter Oecumenici*, no. 54 online at <https://www.liturgia.it/content/instrukiones/inter%20oecumenici.pdf>

⁷² See n. 41 above.

Catholic homilizing (e.g., only by ordained, rooted in an authorized lectionary and a prescribed liturgy, etc.) its decidedly glocal profile leans much more towards universality than pluri-versality. The exclusion of laity and women from the homiletic act renders preaching in a decolonial mode particularly daunting. As Maria Galindo pointedly asserts, “no se puede descolonizar sin depatriarcalizar.”⁷³ Even among clerics, ethnic representation continues to be dominated by those who identify as White/Non-Hispanic, who are yet a dwindling part of the U.S. Catholic population.⁷⁴ Conversely, the Hispanic/Latino population comprises a solid 40% of all US Roman Catholics – a number that jumps to 60% when considering folk under 18 years of age. Moreover, they comprise nearly 71% of the growth of the Roman Catholic Population in the U.S. since 1960.⁷⁵ Their representation among Roman Catholic clergy overall, however, is only about 8% although the ordination class of 2022 showed a slight percentage rise.⁷⁶

Embracing the kin-dom with holy subversion

It never occurred to me that acquiring a Ph.D. in largely western liturgics was becoming certified as an imperial ally. While a bit overstated, a large part of my personal and academic journey sketched above has been

⁷³ “There is no decolonization without depatriarchalization,” the title of her 2013 book (Bolivia: Mujeres Creando, 2013).

⁷⁴ See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Report: U.S. Catholic Population by race/ethnicity,” available at <https://vencuentro.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2021-Catholics-National-Regional-and-Diocesan-.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Hosffman Ospino, “Analysis: Is the U.S. church’s Hispanic Catholic Hope Slipping Away?” at <https://catholicreview.org/analysis-is-the-u-s-churchs-hispanic-catholic-hope-slipping-away/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.usccb.org/resources/ordination%20class%202023%20final%20report.pdf>

unlearning, reinventing and evolving into a committed subversive.

Currently I am in my 15th year of regular presiding and preaching at a vibrant, socially active, justice inclined, LGBTQ+ welcoming and politically left leaning community with a substantial on-line outreach. That kind of extended pulpit exposure does have its drawbacks, especially when it comes to staying fresh and avoiding the ever present challenge of repeating oneself; homily preparation has never before taken so much time and effort. On the other hand, the upside of such a sustained homiletic presence is the opportunity to develop deep levels of mutual respect and trust with an assembly, which allows one to be more theologically provocative and socially critical while still being heard.

While by no stretch of the imagination could I be considered a decolonial preacher, I do strive to embrace a decolonial trajectory in my homilizing as much as possible while still attempting to maintain my ministerial integrity and authenticity. For me this entails a specific theological stance as well as particular strategies or grammars:

A Positive Theological Anthropology: While anthropology ponders what it means to be human, theological anthropology introduces God into that mix, asking: what does it mean to be human in the presence of God?⁷⁷ Among the lenses for assessing any theological anthropology is what might be called the “graced-depraved” or “Karl Rahner-John Calvin” spectrum: at its core it asks do human beings have an inner goodness that instinctively leads them to look to the light or, on the other extreme, are we infused with such pervasive

⁷⁷ A useful introduction to the breadth of this topic from a Roman Catholic perspective is Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey, eds., *T & T Handbook of Theological anthropology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2023).

sinfulness that only divine intervention can even get us to look for the light? I contend that decolonializing preaching requires a theological anthropology that leans towards the graced/Rahnerian side of the spectrum. Anthropology itself emerged from the colonial expansion of Europe and clearly served imperial purposes with its consistent affirmation of European values with the parallel denigration of indigenous peoples and their ways.⁷⁸ Intentional preaching in a decolonial mode, however, requires the preacher to not only admit but deeply embrace the graced nature of humanity across the spectrum of races, ethnicities, languages, genders, economic status and the other constructed frameworks that so often divide “us” from “them.”⁷⁹

New Sources of Wisdom: A hoped for outcome of this more positive theological anthropology is new respect for sources of wisdom and inspiration outside of the Christian Bible and Christianity’s pluriform traditions. This means not only honoring the sacred texts of world religions – such as the Koran, Dharma, and Vedas, among many – but also the cultural wisdom revealed in the myths and storytelling, arts, and artifacts of indigenous as well as marginalized communities. Such is essential if the epistemic revolution of decoloniality is to breach the epistemic fortresses of Western thought and the Christian teachings that were tools of both colonization and colonialization.⁸⁰ In my U.S. context,

⁷⁸ A classic publication in this regard was Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973).

⁷⁹ Robert Sapolsky explains both the neurobiology to this phenomenon as well as its antidote in his *Behave: The Biology of Humans at our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

⁸⁰ Missiologist Stephen Bevans summarizes, “The modern missionary era was in many ways the ‘religious arm’ of colonialism, whether Portuguese and Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth Century, or British, French, German, Belgian or American

this encompasses the music and other art forms often dismissed as “low brow”⁸¹ and cultural resources from ecopoetry⁸² to the cartoons of Charles Schultz⁸³ and even the opinions of deconverting Christians⁸⁴ and the writings of declared atheists and faiththeists.⁸⁵

Rethinking the Lowry “oops”: In one of the more celebrated method books on preaching in the late 20th century, Eugene Lowry proposed that a first critical move in effective preaching is upsetting the equilibrium of the listeners; he calls this the “oops!” step in preaching.⁸⁶ The purpose of this “oops!” is to trigger ambiguity in the listener’s minds, which entices them to engage with the preacher in resolving this ambiguity. This approach seems resonant with Mignolo’s and other’s understanding of decoloniality as an act of epistemic disobedience, cognitive delinking, and an invitation to

colonialism in the nineteenth,” “New Evangelical Vision and Mission,” *Divine Word Missionary Magazine* (2002).

⁸¹ Mentor Nathan Mitchell pointedly noted: “Secretly, many of us believe that God loves the poor, but hates their art. Surely, we suspect, God prefers Mozart to Randy Travis.” “Amen Corner,” *Worship* 70, no.3 (1996) 258.

⁸² An outstanding example is Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came* (Chico CA: Commune Editions, 2015).

⁸³ See Robert L. Short, *The Gospel according to Peanuts* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1965), whose 2000 anniversary edition included a new foreword by none other than celebrated Lutheran theologian Martin Marty; Short’s sequel was *The Parables of Peanuts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

⁸⁴ For an overview of this phenomenon in Roman Catholicism see J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Deconversion from Roman Catholicism: Mapping a Fertile Field,” *American Catholic Studies* 122, no.2 (2011): 1–29.

⁸⁵ I am very impressed with Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012); also, Chris Steadman, *Faiththeist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

⁸⁶ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 28 *et passim*.

move away from accepted patterns of thought and, instead, engage in border thinking. This is a particularly useful strategy for those of us whose preaching is lectionary or biblically rooted, consistently proclaiming familiar scriptural texts than many congregants presume they already know and understand. In the spirit of the Rabbi from Nazareth who consistently achieved a memorable “oops!” through parables of Samaritans and sinners, prodigals and persistent widows, preaching in decolonial mode can help our assemblies to not only recognize but also respect the wisdom of the marginalized and subaltern.

Simulating subaltern voices through Narrative: It is well established that narrative is an effective tool for communication in general and preaching in particular. Neuroscience is empirically documenting this fact by demonstrating how storytelling stimulates activity across various parts of the brain far more effectively than simple information.⁸⁷ Psychologist Keith Oatley compares storytelling to a flight simulator, allowing us vivid simulation of reality without all of the danger.⁸⁸ In the process Oatley argues that story listening and reading fiction can build empathy about the other, concluding that narrative can help us “improve our mental models of others and ourselves.”⁸⁹ Similarly,

⁸⁷ Relevant scientific references are reported in my “Preaching and Narrativity: The Contribution from Neuroscience,” in *Preaching as Spiritual Leadership: Guiding the Faithful as Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. Michael Connors (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2021), 232-241.

⁸⁸ Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley and Jordan B. Peterson, “Exploring the Link Between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes.” *Communications* 34, no.4 (2009): 407-428. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.025>

⁸⁹ Keith Oatley, *The Passionate Muse: Exploring Emotion in Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

philosopher Richard Kearney argues that an empathetic imagination is a *narrative imagination*. The failure of the narrative imagination, according to Kearney, makes possible genocides and atrocities. He concludes, “if we possess narrative sympathy—enabling us to see the world from the other’s point of view—we cannot kill. If we do not, we cannot love.”⁹⁰ Storytelling in decolonial mode may be one of the most effective ways for Roman Catholic clerics to decolonialize the pulpit to some degree. This requires, however, that we listen keenly to subaltern voices and communicate their stories with compassion and respect. An especially effective way of achieving this is through audiobooks. Listening to a preacher Barbara Brown Taylor’s very personal narration of her sacramental world,⁹¹ or McArthur Genius laureate Ocean Vuong’s epistolary novel about the traumatic life of a young gay Vietnamese refugee are alternately eye opening and startling. Through these and other voices ordinarily barred from most Roman Catholic sanctuaries, they allow the homilist to precisely achieve what neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky believes is the only effective response to human’s instinctive tendency to dichotomize between us and them: individuate, individuate, individuate.⁹²

Summary

This paper has attempted to juxtapose decolonial thinking – differentiated from postcolonial theory – with contemporary Roman Catholic homilizing. The funda-

⁹⁰ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London-New York: Routledge, 2002), 140.

⁹¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009).

⁹² Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 423.

mental question that undergirds this exploration is whether a decolonialized Roman Catholic homily is even possible in the U.S. While my first instinct was to respond with a definitive “no,” upon reflection that response seems unnuanced. First of all, there are some Roman Catholic Clergy who speak from a subaltern position: I have taught Dalit priests from India, undocumented clergy from Guatemala, and others whose life journey authenticates their subaltern credentials. On the other hand, these are ordinarily educated males. Furthermore, the fact that all women are canonically barred from homilizing in the Roman Catholic Church, the answer to that question has to be that decolonial homilizing in the U.S. is virtually non-existent.

Analogously, one could ask, “Will we ever experience the fulness of God’s reign in our lifetimes?” While both a socio-political and theological analysis of current global realities in my opinion evokes a resounding “no,” that does not mean that we should not strive towards such a goal. Similarly, while I do believe that in the current configuration of Roman Catholic polity an authentically decolonialized homiletics is virtually impossible, this does not mean, however, that it should not be a worthy goal. Such will require Roman Catholic clerics and those who aspired to that serious self-reflection about their instinctive modes of thinking, sources of wisdom, willingness to be subversively faithful, and learning as far as possible to give voice to subaltern narratives as much as possible. This will undoubtedly trigger pushback, public critique and even conflict. While such is not the goal, it seems the inevitable cost of decolonializing Roman Catholic pulpits positioned to feed all people with renewed dignity and unassailable respect.

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