

Introduction to the Essays of the Consultation on Preaching and Postcolonial Theology

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The essays that follow were first presented as part of a consultation on preaching and postcolonial theology at Boston University in October, 2014, sponsored by the BU Center for Practical Theology. The consultation was an opportunity to bring together a leading scholar in postcolonial theology, Dr. Kwok Pui-lan of Episcopal Theological Seminary; two homiletics who have already started to grapple with postcolonial theory and theology in their work, Drs. Pablo Jiménez and Sarah Travis; and two Ph.D. students, Revs. Tim Jones and Lis Valle, from BU and Vanderbilt respectively.¹ The goal of this interdisciplinary consultation was to jump start a wider conversation on today's postcolonial context in North American homiletics for the sake of the practice of preaching. As an ad hoc research team for the fall term of 2014, we editors named above were all pleased to help bring this consultation together and are now excited to bring its fruits to you, the international and diverse body of homiletics based in North America, the Academy of Homiletics.

About “Us”

The editorial word “we” is chosen with postcolonial care and apprehension. In fact, even “we” are not the same. Revs. Go and Lee, as co-editors, write as graduate research assistants in connection with the mentoring goals of the homiletics Ph.D. program at BU. Both Go and Lee are from Korea and have thus crossed borders for the sake of graduate education in homiletics in the US. Dr. Jacobsen, by contrast, is an Anglo academic employed full-time as a professor and research project director at BU. The point of this self-reflexive disclosure is two-fold. First, one of the hallmarks of postcolonial theory is that it encourages a kind of self-reflexivity about difference and differential power. While the topic of the consultation itself was “preaching in intercultural contexts,” graduate education itself at BU is already intercultural and this, too, needs to be acknowledged and named and not occluded. This is important because both preaching and homiletics are affected by a postcolonial context of migration of persons, intercultural communication, and power differentials that are shaped by the realities of neocolonialism today. We editors are not seeking to be trendy by advancing postcolonial theory as the latest intellectual fad, but honestly facing the truth of our daily realities in church and academy—one that we know first-hand, albeit differently. “We” are always and already affected in our deepest interactions by colonialism. Second, our self-reflexive disclosure establishes from the beginning a complex way of thinking that has not always shaped the way North American homiletics has conceived its work with respect to culture and identity. Identity, or better, identities are not fixed, self-possession, some object of individual self-mastery in understanding, but realized precisely in relationships marked by intercultural interactions. Some of this is inflected in our editorial work by the fact that our discourse is gendered. Still, the capacity for self-reflexivity is not done for its own sake, but for the sake of sound preaching. Both preaching and homiletics are enmeshed in intercultural relationships, that is, take place in a postcolonial context of cultural difference, immigration, and the vestiges of colonial power in the lives of

¹ Special thanks go to Drs. Shelly Rambo, Cristian De La Rosa, and Sung Jung Oh, who together with Revs. Yohan Go and Duse Lee, responded to the papers at the consultation in October, 2014. Their responses were crucial in the process of revising these papers for publication.

human beings living in God’s good creation. In the Heidelberg Disputations, Luther argues that a theology of the cross calls a thing what it really is. “We” as the editors of these papers, seek to help North American preaching and homiletics to preach good news in the shadow of that cross: that means, seeing our postcolonial context for what it really is. It may not be easy, but “we” think you will find it worthwhile.

Postcolonial Theology: A Primer for Reading the Essays to Follow

All of this self-reflexivity begs for a definition of just what postcolonial theology or theory is. We therefore write a few paragraphs here at the outset to present you collegial readers with a postcolonial primer. The goal of such a primer is not to get you the reader ready for some univocal definition, but to prepare you to engage the gracious difference that is to come.

We begin by noting that bringing postcolonial theology and theory in closer relationship to the work of the Academy of Homiletics may not actually be a far stretch.² A number of us in homiletics are also members of the biblical guild. For years, biblical scholars like Warren Carter, Richard Horsley, and John Dominic Crossan have profited from Empire studies that situate biblical texts in the context of imperial and colonial realities in history. Biblical scholars have also witnessed since the early 1990s a burgeoning of literature on postcolonial hermeneutics, which then asks how to interpret biblical texts in light of the *present* context of neocolonial relationships as both a global and local reality. These include scholars like Fernando Segovia, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Musa Dube. In recent years, similar work has been done in theology where the writings of Kwok Pui-lan, Myra Rivera, and Catherine Keller have brought postcolonial theology to the fore. Many homileticians have likely dabbled in postcolonial theology or theory indirectly just by looking over their colleagues’ shoulders.

For those who have not, however, it might be helpful to consider some of the main elements of postcolonial theory as developed in the work of scholars like Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.³ We might begin with the prefix “post.” The idea here is not so much that we are looking at colonial relationships in the rear view mirror: as in, once there were subjugated colonies, but now there are democracies. The term postcolonial is about naming a set of relationships that continue to haunt the realities of life lived in world of the migration of peoples, economic oppression, intercultural meetings and conversations, and the privileging of certain American or Euro-centric ways of doing things, thinking, and speaking. Many postcolonial theologians point to the neocolonial reality we live in today. Perhaps the United States is not a full-fledged imperium with vast colonies in the style of say, the British Empire of the 19th century (although there are parts of the *Pax Americana* world where that would be true!), but even after the wave of nations who threw off the yoke of European colonialisms in the 1960s still live under the *neocolonial* power of the US, which influences life elsewhere by being the guarantor of an economic, cultural, and military world order. The post in postcolonialism does not mean that the relational reality of colonial interactions in life is over. Far from it—in fact, that is precisely part of its complexity and plurivocity.

² A few homileticians have ventured into postcolonial spaces already. See Pablo Jiménez, “Toward a Postcolonial Homiletic: Justo L. González’s Contribution to Hispanic Preaching.” In *Hispanic Christian Thought at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century: Apuntes in honor of Justo L. González* (A. Padilla et al., eds.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 159–67; Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014); and Luke Powery, “Postcolonial Criticism,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Handbook of Preaching*, (P. Wilson, J. Childers, C. LaRue, and J. Rottman, eds.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

³ For a helpful introductory summary that places some of the above named figures in the context of the literature, one may wish to read Ania Loomba’s *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2nd Ed.; London: Routledge, 2005).

For postcolonial theory culture and identity are not fixed realities, but interactive. This is why postcolonial theory includes nuanced and differentiated terms like hybridity and third space.

Hybridity refers to the way identities are not fixed and univocal, but themselves “hybrid” or mixed. It is the nature of our postcolonial context that identity is usually constructed by means of a foil: a binary that differentiates between good and bad cultural identities, white vs. non-white, reasonable vs. emotional, civilized vs. barbaric. In reality, our identities are not so univocal as such colonial discourse would seem to stipulate and for whom the notion of hybridity and mixing (whether understood racially or culturally) is a matter of anxiety. It is as if we needed colonialist language to shore up the truly conflicted identities we are! Hybridity challenges the notion that cultural identities are about purity and superiority. Hybridity also assumes that one need not surrender one identity for another (say, a person living in a colony adopting the worldview of his/her colonizer) nor simply recover some ancient identity pure of colonial influence (a romantic move). Instead, hybridity can help persons attempt to construct an identity out of the postcolonial context itself, an intercultural meeting place of differentiated power where identity is necessarily forged. Depending on the colonizing power and its work of subjugation, both colonizer and colonized find their identities problematized in the postcolonial context, which has huge implications for preaching itself. So much of recent homiletic theory in North America has tended to speak of identity and culture in univocal terms in a given community, whether in the general turn to culture in the Tillichian tendencies of the so-called new homiletic or in the countercultural embrace of postliberal versions of identity. Hybridity can help contemporary homiletics explore identity as a place of productive, multivocal tension.

Third space refers to a notion that Homi Bhabha developed to describe new places where cultures meet and form. If hybridity refers to the kind of mixing of identities and cultures that empires feared but inevitably spawned, third space refers to the new places or locations where identities and cultures meet and hierarchies may be overturned.⁴ The notion of third space is itself both troublesome and promising for thinking through and living out decolonized identities, practices (like preaching), and discourses (like homiletics). Given the fact that preachers and hearers find themselves in ever more diverse contexts, postcolonial theology offers new vistas for thinking about the language and images we use in preaching as acts of representation, the ways we construe ourselves and our hearers in their contexts, and the kinds of sinful realities and hopeful visions we might name in the intercultural, postcolonial reality that we live in.

This in turn is important for the practice of preaching and the discipline of homiletics in North America and beyond. “We,” the editors, and “you,” the readers are already enmeshed in a postcolonial context, both as colonizer and colonized. We do not enter into these realities on behalf of someone else, but mixed up in our own entanglements and de-formations of relationships and identities with others. Our hope is that you will view the dialogue in the articles to follow itself as an intercultural process: where the Word of God is heard in interaction with others, whether African-American, Anglo, Korean, or Latin@. Just what does gospel sound like in this intercultural, postcolonial context in which we live? The papers to follow will help all of us to discern not only each other and ourselves, but the new thing God is doing.

The Essays: Preaching, Postcolonial Theology, and Intercultural Contexts

Although there is also no single, univocal definition of postcolonial preaching among the authors of these essays, there are notable convergences among the essays in understandings of postcolonial preaching and its tasks in intercultural contexts. In this brief summary, we aim for

⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. “Cultures In Between” in *Artforum* (September 1993), 167–214.

an overview of what is to come in this conversation to enable your deeper participation as readers.

In “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Context,” Kwok Pui-lan explores the central issues of postcolonial preaching and proposes a definition of postcolonial preaching as “a locally rooted and globally conscious performance that seeks to create a Third Space so that the faith community can imagine new ways of being in the world and encountering God’s salvific action for the oppressed and marginalized.”⁵ According to this definition, preaching is a performative action that seeks to create new places where two or more cultures meet and new potential identities, which are fluid, porous, and hybrid, are forged. This is a subversive action against the binary logic of colonial discourse that seeks only a univocal identity and one narrowly defined by territorial, cultural or racial essentialism. Second, preaching as performance is not an individual task of the pastor but is a communal task of an entire faith community. Not only the authority to preach is to be shared with members of the community, but also the recovery of the dynamic interaction between a preacher and a congregation in the preaching event is necessary. The purpose of preaching is to create and nurture a multivocal and dialogical community rather than seeking a univocal and homogenous communal identity by means of persuasion through preaching.

In his article “If You Just Close Your Eyes,” Pablo Jiménez criticizes traditional deductive preaching as colonial preaching and calls for developing a postcolonial Caribbean homiletic aimed at the liberation of the Caribbean people. He points out some of the necessary building blocks for a postcolonial homiletic from the Caribbean. First, Jiménez advocates for *a new reading of history* that helps Caribbeans realize the foundational crimes of modernity perpetrated upon them. Second, he calls for a “pastoral theology” that empowers the people of God to face and resist against both personal and social sin. Third, Jiménez champions a *biblical hermeneutics* that rejects imperialistic readings of the Bible and fosters the liberation of people. Fourth, he calls for a *critical dialogue with postmodern homiletics* in North America that will provide a fertile resource to develop a postcolonial Caribbean homiletic. With these fundamental building blocks, Jiménez envisions developing a multilingual, multicultural, and ecumenical postcolonial homiletic in the Caribbean context.

In “Toward Postcolonial Liturgical Preaching,” Lis Valle points out the segregation of Christian congregations in the United States as both a consequence of imperialism and colonialism from the past and a cause of continuing cycles of oppression in the present. As a way of overcoming segregation in worship and decolonizing religious rituals, Valle develops a postcolonial liturgical preaching from a distinctively Caribbean perspective by means of a dialogue with the Caribbean religion of the Taíno. In the complementary dualities of the Taíno worldview, Valle finds a contextually relevant resource to resist colonial systems and a corresponding worldview that is built upon antagonistic, binary divisions. Her proposal is a postcolonial liturgy in three movements: “(1) spaces of tension, consisting of lament and repentance; (2) journeying imaginatively, consisting of proclamation; and (3) experiences of connectedness, consisting of celebration and praise.”⁶ The two-fold role of preaching in a postcolonial liturgy is to fund the imagination of the worshipers and construct alternative realities. A further role may be to facilitate worshipers in moving imaginatively from spaces of tension to eschatological moments of convergence characterized by connectedness and reconciling between colonized and colonizer.

⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, 2.

⁶ Lis Valle, 9.

In his article, “Black Preaching in Brown Places,” Timothy Jones argues that, due to current demographic shifts in the United States, it is necessary to develop new homiletic strategies for black preaching that enable and aid intercultural congregational development. By using postcolonial concepts such as marginality, hybridity, and self-reflexivity, Jones finds some points of convergence between Black communities and Hispanic communities and takes them as the points of departure toward a Black Mestizo homiletic. The shared, oppressed condition of Black and Hispanic communities and the naming of their experience of marginalization in society offer a connecting point for the two merging communities. The postcolonial concept of hybrid identity provides a conceptual framework for developing a new understanding of preaching’s primary goal as the formation of a new kind of racialized identity beyond narrowly defined univocal ones.⁷ The idea of self-reflexivity helps Black and Hispanic preachers critically reflect on their motives and connections to empire, thus revealing internalized and unquestioned colonial values and assumptions.

In “Troubled Gospel” Sarah Travis, like the other authors above, is keenly aware of her social location as a white, well-educated woman with stable financial resources. She is therefore clear about delimiting her work mainly for those who are white, affluent, European descendants. Travis develops a postcolonial understanding of preaching that “resists colonizing discourse by casting an alternative vision of human community”⁸ based on the social doctrine of the Trinity. Travis defines postcolonial preaching as “a process of awareness, renaming, and identity formation.”⁹ A function of decolonizing preaching is to awaken people with relative power from the delusion that they have so much power as to change the system. It also should make them realize their own captivity to empire and need of liberation. Thus, decolonizing preaching rejects a binary division of identity between colonized and colonizer and follows instead a postcolonial understanding of fluidity and hybridity of identity. In this sense, postcolonial preaching as the process of identity formation does not seek homogeneous identity. Rather it is the process of forming hybridized identity, even in communities of privilege.

Toward a Third Space in Homiletics: Preaching In Between

Our hope in bringing together these conversation partners is to create a new kind of discussion, a homiletical-theoretical “third space,” if you will, in which we try to open a meaningful conversation about the inflection and transformation of theories and practices of preaching in light of a postcolonial, intercultural reality that we find in between us. “We” hope that you, as we have in undergoing this research process at BU School of Theology, will find yourselves both challenged and graced in mutuality and openness to hearing and perhaps even speaking gospel in new ways.

⁷ In this project I am searching for a homiletic that would lead Black congregations to be places of welcome for Latin@ members such that the racial identity of the church would be hybridized. These churches would no longer be seen solely as Black churches but as congregations that were able to be home for Black and Latin@ people. However, I am not interested in jettisoning the role that Black and Latin@ preaching has played in the formation of Black and Latin@ identity, respectively. On the contrary, I am imagining a homiletic that would both assist with the formation of Black and Latin@ identity while also forming a community that fused these identities together. This holding of relatively static Black and Latin@ individual identities in tension with the formation of a hybridized community racialized identities puts separates my understanding of identity from that of many postcolonial scholars who tend to see identity as a much more fluid concept.

⁸ Travis, 2.

⁹ Travis, 9.