

## **TOWARDS A POSTCOLONIAL THEOLOGY OF NONVIOLENCE AN INTERRELIGIOUS PATH OF RESISTANCE AGAINST COLONIALITY**

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**ABSTRACT:** In this contribution, I intend to describe nonviolence as a genuine postcolonial response to violence. I shall part from a different position, namely postcolonial criticism of nonviolence as an intent to deter decolonization and liberation. A profound study of postcolonial literature, especially religious literature, will reveal, however, that the nonviolent resistance to violence already can be understood as a step in decolonial liberation. In a dialogue with postcolonial religious thinkers and practitioners, I shall try to outline a postcolonial theology of nonviolence that can help us to liberate Christian theology from the bonds of alienating violence.

In questo contributo desidero descrivere la non violenza come una risposta postcoloniale sincera alla violenza. Partirei da una posizione differente, cioè il criticismo postcoloniale della nonviolenza come un intento per scoraggiare la colonizzazione e la liberazione. Uno studio profondo della letteratura postcoloniale, in particolare quella religiosa, rivelerà tuttavia che la resistenza nonviolenta contro la violenza può essere vista come un passo verso la liberazione decoloniale. In un dialogo con i pensatori e praticanti religiosi postcoloniali, cercherò di sottolineare una teologia postcoloniale della nonviolenza che può aiutarci a liberare la teologia cristiana dai legami della violenza alienante.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism, Nonviolence, Mohandas Gandhi, Jawdat Said, Postcolonial Theology

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Colonialismo, Nonviolenza, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawdat Said, Teologia postcoloniale

Violence and nonviolence have been under dispute since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022. While Pope Francis

has insisted, from the very first day of this war, in his commitment towards peaceful and nonviolent solutions, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Cyril has supported the aggression, and many church leaders in Europe, including the German catholic Bishop's Conference, have pleaded for intensifying military responses and supporting the Ukrainian military with arms supply.

This is the backdrop against which I have been seeking to further elaborate on theological arguments in favor of nonviolence, on the one hand, and to deepen my understanding of a postcolonial conversion in theology, on the other. It is a first attempt to engage the two important threads of my theological research in a thorough and critical conversation. In this contribution, I intend to describe nonviolence as a genuine postcolonial response to violence. I shall part from a different position, namely postcolonial criticism of nonviolence as an intent to deter decolonization and liberation. A profound study of postcolonial literature, especially religious literature, will reveal, however, that the nonviolent resistance to violence and colonialism already can be understood as a step in decolonial liberation. In a dialogue with postcolonial religious thinkers and practitioners, I shall try to outline a postcolonial theology of nonviolence that can help us to liberate Christian theology from the bonds of alienating violence.

My use of postcolonial theory and theology needs one more preliminary remark: As a White, European, Christian theologian, I confess to the dangers of representation and appropriation described in many postcolonial discussions. Although I am aware of that problem, I cannot but notice the need of European theology to answer to the criticism that postcolonial studies have brought and are bringing forward. Europe is a postcolonial continent, because it was from here that most colonial endeavors in the past have parted. It is our obligation to listen to postcolonial criticism, learn from it, and answer to it. This is precisely what I pretend to do in this paper, conscious of the fact, that as a European scholar trying to speak in the name of postcolonialism, I will expose myself to the risk of resuming colonial exploitation and expropriation (cf. Silber 2021, pp. 138–144; 193–198).

## **1. Postcolonial critique of nonviolence**

Nonviolence has been widely absent from postcolonial studies. Indian historian Vinay Lal (2010) calls it “a gaping hole in postcolonial thought”. Lal links this absence to postcolonial dependence on Western thought. He writes: “The point cannot be reinforced enough: nonviolence has never had any salience in Western thought, and postcolonial thought has in this respect scarcely deviated from the intellectual traditions of the West” (*ibid.*). So, in his criterion, postcolonial studies still depend, in this aspect, from colonial cultural domination and repeat a typically Western disdain for nonviolent practices. He writes: “It is characteristic of most social thought in the West that it has been riveted on violence — here, postcolonial thought barely diverged from orthodox social science [...] Nonviolence is barely present in intellectual discussions” (*ibid.*).

On the contrary, anticolonial figures like Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 61), have denounced the call to nonviolence as a trick of the local colonialist bourgeoisie to stop movements of decolonial liberation. In Fanon’s interpretation, the idea of nonviolence appears only “at the decisive moment”, and is introduced by “the intellectual and economic elite of the colonized country” trying to defend their interests which they view as identical to the interests of the colonizers. To Fanon, “Non-violence is an attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize table, before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made, before any blood has been shed” (*ibid.*).

Edward Said (2015) coincides with this interpretation insofar as he adverts against the often-practiced unilateralism of calls to nonviolence. In the case of Palestine, to call only Palestinians to nonviolence and not Israeli forces at the same time, is considered by Said as implausible as well as inefficient. Also, it tacitly presumes that only Palestinians are being violent, depicting finally — and also inadvertently — Palestinians as inherently violent, while Israeli forces supposedly only do their duty in defending their citizens and their country.

Fanon and Said point to a very delicate aspect of postcolonial nonviolence that can rightly be criticized: the idea of nonviolence may be abused by the colonizers (or the imperialists or the dominators etc.) to

stabilize their rule and to reject all forms of resistance to it. The call to nonviolence may be misread by colonizers and colonized as well as an imperative to passivity and submission. This experience may be one of the reasons why nonviolence has not been present in many of the works of postcolonial studies.

Edward Said regrets the absence of profound reflections on nonviolence in postcolonial theories. Referring to the fight against apartheid in South Africa, Said writes: “We have not understood at all the policy of non–violence” (2015, p. 237). To establish coexistence between Palestine and Israel, or between Palestinian and Israeli citizens, it is absolute necessary, as Said continues, to talk to each other, as the African National Congress talked to white South Africans. Only by nonviolent means and continued talks can “the exclusivists, the racists, and the fundamentalists” (*ibid.*) of both sides be isolated.

This is not easy, because of the long record of violent fight against colonial rule. As the Mexican researcher Carlos Fernando López de la Torre (2015, p. 54) writes, in a Latin American context:

The arrival on the scene of the Cuban Revolution strongly marked the belief that only revolutionary violence would inevitably transform the prevailing political system in Latin American countries, accused of subordinating national interests to those of US imperialism.

This trust in the liberating power of violence, according to López de la Torre, was an idea that spread to anticolonial liberation movements in the whole world, especially with the support of the Cuban government. So, if we are to believe that only revolutionary violence can liberate and decolonize *the wretched of the earth*, it is understandable that nonviolence has had a difficult stance in most of postcolonial thought.

## **2. Nonviolence as a postcolonial response to (post)colonial violence**

The belief in violence is something that anticolonial movements have learned precisely from the dominating colonial system. Colonialism is an inherently violent social structure and complex of practices and

attitudes. It is precisely Frantz Fanon who gives a pretty accurate account of the mimetic character of anticolonial violence. This liberating violence is a neat copy of dominating violence. Fanon (1963, p. 83–84) writes:

The [...] combat between native and settler [...] takes the form of an armed and open struggle... the people are decided to trust to violent methods only. He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free. The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force.

Fanon extends this idea to other forms of violence that are not openly military or colonial: “Between the violence of the colonies and that peaceful violence that the world is steeped in, there is a kind of complicit agreement, a sort of homogeneity” (1963, p. 81). While we have to understand his concept of the «world» as the world of 1961, when his book about *The Wretched of the Earth* was published in French, the idea of “peaceful violence”, in my opinion, needs to be interpreted in an ironic way for what today we would call structural and epistemic violence.

So, for Fanon, anticolonial violence is what the colonized people have learned from the colonizers and their own use of different forms of violence<sup>(1)</sup>. Albeit, Fanon does not use this analysis to reject violence as a means of liberation. In his judgment, “for the colonized people this violence [...] invests their characters with positive and creative qualities” (1963, p. 72). Fanon believes that the shared use of violence by the colonized will have a unifying force that helps to build a strong and independent national state. More than sixty years later, however, it may be said that this expectation of the colonized people was deceptive: the mimetic power of anti-colonial violence causes revolutionary

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(1) Cf., for the mimetic and contagious use of violence in Girard and Gandhi: Palaver 2021, p. 988.

or liberating violence to be almost or just as destructive as the colonial violence experienced before.

What comes to mind here is the idea of “the Myth of Redemptive Violence” (Wink 1999, pp. 42–62) identified and analyzed by the US–American theologian Walter Wink. This conviction, the belief in violence as a solution, as the only or best solution to a great number of problems, is deeply rooted in our Western culture without anyone having to actively propagate it: violence saves, only violence can stop violence, only violence can bring justice to bear. The way in which Frantz Fanon subscribes to the use of violence in order to end colonialism and bring forward a new, independent, free, and autonomous rule, reminds of this myth that Walter Wink criticizes.

As Wink says, the only way out of the circle or the “spiral of violence” (1999, p. 82) is to practice nonviolence, is to refuse to take part in violence and to be a part of it. Nonviolence, therefore, has been experienced not only as a way of resisting to and of breaking colonial rule, but also of leaving the chain of colonial mimicry: Instead of copying the colonizer’s praxis, instead of obeying to the colonizer’s framing that violence is the only language the colonized understand, nonviolent anticolonial resistance proves an independent self-awareness that steps out of the epistemological framework of colonial rule and refuses to debate colonialism on its own terms.

This is what Mohandas Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and many others experienced in their nonviolent campaigns against colonial rule: the British soldiers were very versed in the repression of violent uprisings, but they could not deal with nonviolent resistance. They were used to many forms of violence, and they used it freely; violence was their epistemological framework. But they were unable to react to the denial of violent resistance. Abdul Ghaffar Khan famously wrote in his autobiography: “The British used to say, a nonviolent Pathan is more dangerous than a violent Pathan” (1969, p. 145).

The same experience has been made by many other nonviolent resisters in colonial and postcolonial situations. US–American political scholars Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth (2011) have shown in an extensive study, that nonviolent resistance not only prevents conflicts and ends them more efficiently than violence, but also leads more

probably to stable and democratic societies. The reason is that practical nonviolence already promotes peaceful and just relationships in the process of conflict resolution, which is also a long-term goal. The same result has been documented by the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, that presents a great number of different nonviolent conflict solutions in many parts of the contemporary world (cf. Berger *et al.* 2020).

Nonviolence is an anticolonial force and resists not only to the open military, political, and economic violence of colonialism, but also to its epistemic and spiritual aspects. It is an instrument that can transform the power and the significance of violence in coloniality. A “victory attained by violence is tantamount to a defeat, for it is momentary”, as Mohandas Gandhi (1919) wrote. It is a defeat to the spirit of colonialism and to the myth of redemptive violence that is alive in it. Nonviolent resistance, therefore, is a means to express one’s detachment from colonial rule, it is a form of disobedience and decolonial insubordination. Nonviolence also expresses the identification and the praxis of a different spirituality; it is, as we shall now have the opportunity to see, a religious means of resistance.

### **3. Nonviolence as a religious means of resistance**

Nonviolence as a means of resistance has been elaborated, conceptualized, and practiced by many religious figures. Pope Francis, in his message for the World Day of Peace in 2017, explicitly mentioned the Hindu Mohandas Gandhi, the Muslim Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and the Christian Martin Luther King as models of a “decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence”. “Women in particular — he continues — are often leaders of nonviolence, as, for example, was Leymah Gbowee and the thousands of Liberian women, who organized pray-ins and non-violent protest” (Francis 2017). Very strong and long-standing non-violent traditions can also be observed in Buddhism, Judaism, and in many other religions of many parts of the world. It cannot be denied that religions have had their share of inciting to violence and of legitimizing different kinds of war. It must be emphasized, however, that the practice of nonviolence is not an exception in any of the religions



worldwide. On the contrary, influential religious leaders in all religions have brought forward spiritual and theological arguments based on their own traditions in favor of nonviolent political action.

In the field of postcolonial discourse, however, religions often do not play a major, positive role. While Christianity — and sometimes also Islam — are dismissed as being the religions of the conquerors, postcolonial theorists very often ignore or despise local religions as being conservative and unable to reform. The importance of religious practice in decolonization, especially nonviolent religious praxis, therefore has not been, so far, the focus of major postcolonial attention.

The most influential religious figure that represents a lifelong commitment to and spirituality of nonviolence is arguably Mohandas Gandhi. Of him, the Indian Jesuit George Pattery (2021), in an extensive study dedicated to *Gandhi the Believer*, expresses his conviction, that the life and public work of Gandhi cannot be understood without reading it in the light of his religious beliefs and seeing him first and foremost as a believer committed to harmonize his life and his spirituality.

Pattery identifies *satyagraha* as the nucleus of Gandhi's spirituality: a firmness in Truth that comprehends Truth as a universal reality including the truth of every other person, of every other being. Gandhi's faithfulness to this truth of every being means an unyielding yet nonviolent commitment to it and a steadfast resistance to everything and anyone opposed to this truth (cf. Rynne 2008). *Satyagraha* is, for Gandhi, a profound consequence of his own Hindu upbringing. At the same time, he is utterly convinced, that it follows exactly in the same natural way out of a deep and honest understanding of Christianity and of Islam, the two religions with which he dialogued most.

Among the Muslims who could be named to support Gandhi's convictions is Jawdat Said, a lesser known theologian and activist from Syria. Said parts paradigmatically from the Qur'anic version of the history of Cain and Abel. In the course of his rereading of the Qur'anic text (Q 5:26–28) Said (2010) comments:

Cain, who failed in his quest, resorted to killing instead of reviewing his own mistake. "I will surely kill you," he said to his brother, while



his brother, who became conscious of his own humanity and aware of the blessing of human intellect, refused to resort to violence. He responded, “If you do stretch your hand to kill me, I (surely) will not stretch my hand to kill you: for I fear God” [Q 5:28]. Abel was determined and willing to face the consequences of his stance, and refused to respond. He realized his ability to utilize the power of human reason. This stance of non-violence, as shown above, inaugurates a new era of humans’ evolutionary consciousness.

By choosing the example of the two sons of Adam, Said (1996) points towards the fact that the question of violence and nonviolence is “not just a problem of Muslims, but a human problem, from their first existence on earth, to the present, and for some time in the future”. At the same time, the resort to nonviolence is possible for everyone, according to Said, because of human reason. To *Be like Adam’s Upright Son* — as the title of another one of Said’s books (1996) reads — is the choice any reasonable human can make. It is at the same time the option all Muslims and other believers *should* take, and it is — in the analysis of Said — this resort to nonviolence that distinguishes a reasonable decision from the Western way of life. Without any open reference to postcolonialism, Said demonstrates here, that the nonviolent solution of conflicts is the only reasonable one, it is indicated by religious revelation, and at the same time it distinguishes from the violent military conflict strategies inflicted by Western imperialism. So, as Austrian Orientalist Rüdiger Lohlker (2022, p. 160) comments, “*not* engaging in violence is the final proof of intellectual freedom”.

We could name quite a number of other important figures from many religions, like Martin Buber, Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Dalai Lama, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Dorothy Day, Dorothee Sölle and many others, including Pope Francis, who all coincide in the idea that nonviolence is in fact the means of conflict solution typical of religious traditions. Many religions are convinced that humanity is one, that every human being is related to everybody and everything else, and that fraternity is the one chosen path indicated by all religions and for humankind. This is the reason, why Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt, have published together a joint declaration *on human fraternity, for world peace and living together* in 2019. In this document, the two important religious leaders “resolutely declare that religions must never

incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood” (Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019). This decision against violence and for nonviolence is an act of disobedience and an affirmation of autonomy against colonial and postcolonial dependence. If Christianity is to take part in this reasonable decision, it is necessary for us to confess and amend our former adherence to colonial violence. Christianity needs to return and convert again to our own roots in the gospel and develop connections of fraternity to all religions, and to all humankind, especially all those who have been objects and victims of colonialism and violence.

#### **4. Towards a postcolonial theology of nonviolence**

Postcolonial theologies have enhanced enormously our theological perception in the past two decades (cf. Silber 2021). Building on Liberation Theologies, intercultural, and indigenous theologies, on the one hand, and learning from the broad theoretical frameworks of postcolonial and decolonial studies, they have brought forward ample criticism of European theological methods and epistemological approaches. In dialogue with postcolonial theological perspectives, I will now outline a postcolonial theology of nonviolence. As I am a Christian theologian, this will be a Christian, and specifically a catholic proposal. At the same time, however, I hope that this proposal will prove to be open to dialogue with other religious and cultural traditions. As an outline, it is in no way intended to be a finished or completed “postcolonial theology of nonviolence”. On the contrary, it still needs to be discussed, criticized, re-elaborated, corrected, and improved. In these few paragraphs, I can only sketch its relationships to Liberation Theology, eco-theology, feminist theology, among others. I present these considerations as a point of departure for these ulterior endeavors.

##### *4.1. Rejection of all forms of violence*

A first element of a postcolonial theology of nonviolence constitutes the need to reject all forms of violence at once, not only military and

immediately physical violence. Postcolonial studies have alerted us to the many hidden forms of violence, in sexist and racist power relations, in processes of othering and alienation, in economic and ecological exploitation, and fundamentally in the many forms of epistemic violence. Frantz Fanon's argument that the idea of nonviolence is only a pretext to suppress liberating uprising sounds very convincing if we do not tackle all the other forms of violence that violate the lives and the cultures of the vast majority of human beings worldwide.

Fanon's critique of nonviolence as an instrument of colonialist elites to strengthen the status quo can thus be accepted and transformed into the critique of all other forms of violence, colonial or not, such as epistemic, structural, patriarchal, economic, and ecological violence, among others. If we criticize, reject, and resist all these different forms of violence, whether open and concealed, nonviolence can no longer be used as a tool of manipulation in the hands of the colonized elites.

Among these many forms of structural violence, we must address the religious and cultural centralism of world Christianity. Precisely in its catholic shape, but also in many protestant churches, Christianity is still predominantly a European institution, with structures and laws that have been designed in European history, and based on economic wealth accumulated in the era of colonialism. No postcolonial theology of nonviolence can be developed without a self-critical awareness of our churches' entanglement with colonialism and worldwide exploitation and domination.

The same is true for the structure and identity of academic science, not only in theology, but — from our point of view as theologians — theology is the location in academia that we should be concerned about most. Postcolonial nonviolence will mean that we must address the structures of our ecclesiastical and theological institutions, their dependence on colonialism, on patriarchy, on racism, and on many other forms of structural and epistemic violence. And we need to design nonviolent ways to structure our global institutions in the Church and in theology.

#### *4.2. Respecting autonomy*

A second important element for theology of nonviolence in and from Europe is to place ourselves in the perspective of the subaltern. Latin

American Liberation Theology has reminded us since the 1970s of the necessity of the Option for the Poor as a prerequisite to be able to do theology. This is still very necessary. Latin American theology has elaborated, in the last decades, on the extension and deepening of the Option for the Poor: it is necessary to adopt the perspectives of women and LGBTQ+ persons, people of indigenous and of African ancestry, persons in migratory or environmental distress, and many others. One way of practicing this Option for the Poor is to create structures and communities, where these poor people themselves can speak and are able to do theology on their own.

Postcolonial studies have discussed widely the self-determination of poor people as a problem, since Gayatri Spivak provocatively raised the issue that the subaltern cannot speak (cf. 1994, pp. 66–111). With this affirmation, she showed the complexity of the power of colonial remains in our culture, in our ways of thinking and speaking, in our epistemology. It is not easy to deal with the destruction colonialism has brought to the world, and it is not only a question of good will: a considerable amount of self-criticism is necessary, as well as well-designed critical methods of analyzing and transforming our praxis in theology and in the Church.

This means that we need to respect the autonomy and the self-expression of formerly colonized churches and people, even if we do not like how they chose to express themselves. When Pope Francis (2023) called “Hands off Africa!” and “Stop choking Africa” in his visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo in January 2023, he was of course referring to the economic and ecological exploitation of the continent, a very timely and necessary prophetic admonition. But “Hands off Africa!” must also be a theological and ecclesiastical call to transform our ways of being global churches and of doing theology.

#### 4.3. *Attending to the wounds*

A third element of a postcolonial theology of nonviolence is the need to attend to the wounds of colonialism. Again, it is Pope Francis who asks us, in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, to “touch the wounded flesh of the victims” (2020, No. 261). The Pope continues calling to mind different

groups of victims of war, and then appeals: “Let us hear the true stories of these victims of violence, look at reality through their eyes, and listen with an open heart to the stories they tell” (*ibid.*).

To attend to the wounds and to listen to the stories of the victims are important acts of nonviolence. In the Italian original of the encyclical, the Pope even calls to listen to «the truth of these victims». Listening to these truths as one expression of nonviolence places the experiences of the victims into the center of attention and attendance. The poor, the subaltern, the victims of war and violence, are always the ones who suffer from new forms of violence. Their stories, their truths, their wounds can tell us that.

In a theological language, it is the cross that needs to be placed once more into the center of attention. Christianity is a religion of the cross, and our faith in the resurrection is the belief, that God has risen a victim of violence and torture, of political persecution and of racial discrimination from the dead. The message of the cross — which is a scandalous foolishness, in the words of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 1:23) — needs to be read as a call to conversion of believers to the wounds of all the tortured, violated, crippled and murdered people of today, and also to all the other violated and manipulated beings of God’s creation.

The victims of colonialism are used to be objects of violence. If their wounds are not attended, if the disastrous crimes of colonialism are not addressed and reparations are not even discussed, we must not be surprised, if they sometimes believe, that the structures of epistemic, economic and neoliberal violence can only be overcome by means of military violence or terrorism. This is why we need to pay attention to their wounds, their stories, their experiences of faith.

## **5. Conclusion**

Many other elements of a postcolonial theology of nonviolence could be added here: the need of an open dialogue on theological and epistemological alternatives, the opportunities of a sincere intercultural and interreligious dialogue, the necessity to relate nonviolent conflict strategies to economic and ecological justice, the defeat of patriarchy and

racism, and other necessary steps towards a postcolonial theology of nonviolence.

The first and most important step is, in my opinion, the acknowledgment of the postcolonial condition of the world we are living in, its scope and its consequences, and the complexities of the violence it exerts in many cultural areas. For theologians, this means that we need to recognize the coloniality of theology, the intricate entanglement of theology into the violence of coloniality and of its consequences in contemporary conflicts and wars.

For this acknowledgment, it is necessary to center our attention towards the victims of violence and of coloniality. This attendance will transform our theology in many aspects. In my criterion, this transformation will deepen our commitment to nonviolence, and will help us to convert Christianity towards a profoundly nonviolent religion, in the memory and in fidelity to the first generations of Christians and to the crucified victim of violence whose resurrection nourishes our faith throughout the centuries.

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