

Engaging Diversity in Teaching Religion and Theology: An Intercultural, De-colonial Epistemic Perspective

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Abstract. *This essay explores new ways of engaging diversity in the production of knowledge in the classroom using coloniality as an analytical lens. After briefly engaging some of the recent literature on coloniality, focusing on the epistemic dimension, the author uses the example of teaching a course on religion, culture, and theology, where he employs this analysis, to develop a new pedagogical approach as a step towards an intercultural, de-colonial theological education.*

The West was, and still is, the only geo-historical location that is both part of the classification of the world *and the only perspective that has the privilege of possessing dominant categories of thoughts from which and where the rest of the world can be described, classified, understood and “improved.”*

Walter Mignolo, 2005

Few of us would challenge that in too many of our [theology] classrooms the learning/teaching style privileges the values of Western Enlightenment.

Gary Riebe-Estrella

Overview and Introduction

In recent years, thanks to many new voices of scholars on the cultural “margins,” as well as in mainstream academia, the boundaries of the discourse on cultural diversity in relation to teaching and learning and the production of knowledge have expanded in many ways. These voices have resonated also in the institutions of theological higher education and have raised new challenges to the traditional ways of teaching and learning theology and religion, as well as to curricular designs and content. As a result of these new challenges, rethinking the pedagogy of teaching and learning in religion and theology, particularly in racially and culturally diverse classrooms, became the focus of many consultations, research projects, and workshops.¹ Given the growing cultural

¹ Over the past decade, just to give a few examples, the Committee on Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education (CORE) of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and The Fund for Theological Education (FTE) held several broad consultations on this topic, which included many theological schools across the U.S. and Canada. The author participated in two of these consultations: “Strength and Strategies: A Consultation on Student and Faculty Diversity in Theological Education,” March 9–11, 2006, organized by ATS and FTE, and “Enhancing Ethnic Diversity in Theological Education,” March 27–29, 2009, which was organized by the Commission on Accreditation of ATS. The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion has also organized several workshops for diverse groups of professors of religion and theology on this theme. My participation in the “Colloquy on Fostering Effective Teaching and Learning in Racially and Culturally Diverse Classroom”

diversity of students in seminaries and divinity schools in the U.S. today, and the growing awareness of the significance and implications of this diversity, it has become unacceptable – and politically incorrect – in most educational institutions not to take cultural diversity in the classroom seriously. In addition, the growing number of international students at ATS schools, mostly from non-Western countries, adds other dimensions to this diversity and makes the intercultural conversation, particularly in relation to the role of religion, theology, and the churches in colonial history and the questions of theological knowledge and power, more complex, yet necessary.² How do we do theological education that takes both the issues of diversity and coloniality seriously in the globalized seminaries and divinity schools of North America? The conversations about diversity and interculturality, as the above mentioned articles demonstrate, focus primarily on syllabi, pedagogy, and institutional transformation: How do we develop teaching methods that are respectful of and engage students from different cultural backgrounds? and, How do we include voices and sources from other cultural perspectives in our reading lists? How do we make our educational institutions, as a whole, a learning and teaching environment that is aware of, respectful, and hospitable to cultural and racial diversity? How do we rethink the structures of the institutions and redefine their mission in light of the new awareness of diversity and commitment to racial educational justice?³

Building on the arguments developed by Charles Foster on diversity in theological education, Lee, Shields, and Oh, in their article “Theological Education in a Multicultural Environment: Empowerment or Disempowerment?,” question many uncritical assumptions faculty in theological schools have regarding preparing students from

in 2006–2007 was an opportunity for articulating the initial insights of this essay. The conversations at the Faculty of Color Seminar at Catholic Theological Union between 2007–2009, which were an outcome of the Wabash colloquy, were also significant for the further development of my thinking on this topic and for writing this essay.

The following recent articles, which I will refer to later in this essay, are also an indication of the growing interest in this field of scholarship on teaching and learning in theology and religion. Jack A. Hill, Melanie L. Harris, and Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez (2009), “Fighting the Elephant in the Room: Ethical Reflections on White Privilege and Other Systems of Advantage in the Teaching of Religion”; Cameron Lee, Candace Shields, and Kristen Oh (2008), “Theological Education in a Multicultural Environment: Empowerment or Disempowerment?”; and Fernando A. Cascante-Gómez (2008), “Advancing Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Theological Education: A Model of Reflection and Action,” are only a few examples. All three articles include bibliographies of excellent resources on this topic. Also, a recent issue of *Theological Education*, 45, no. 1, 2009 has a special focus on race and ethnicity and includes an article that describes the new 2009–2013 CORE initiative in this area. See in particular in the same issue the article by Gary Riebe-Estrella, “Engaging Borders: Lifting up Difference and Unmasking Division,” 19–25.

² In his recent article “Gifts Differing: The Educational Value of Race and Ethnicity,” Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director of ATS, argues for including international students when considering racial and ethnic diversity. The author’s analysis of diversity and its significance for theological education in the rest of the article does not offer particular insights on the implications of including international students in the reflection on diversity. However, including international students in the conversation is already an important step. According to Aleshire, if we include international students in our statistics of diversity, the ratio of racial/ethnic students at ATS schools will reach 35 percent. At CTU, because of the international nature of the religious communities that send their students to the school, the ratio of students of color and international students together is well above 50 percent (Aleshire 2009, 4).

³ The article by Cascante-Gómez cited above proposes a model and process for institutional transformation.

different cultural and racial backgrounds for academic success and effective ministry in a variety of cultural settings. However, despite the significant effort by educators to deal with these issues, the question of how to create and sustain learning environments that are welcoming and empowering to students of all cultural backgrounds, especially when the classroom includes a significant number of international students, remains open (Lee, Shields, and Oh (2008); see also Charles Foster (2002), cited by Lee et al.). In general, the lenses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, culture, and so forth have often been used as hermeneutical, pedagogical, and sometimes epistemic, critical perspectives on the production and function of knowledge in many disciplines. The lens of colonial difference in the classroom, which I will explain below, however, is rarely clearly named and given the attention it merits. From this perspective, there are key questions that need to be addressed concerning the power of Eurocentric educational approaches that highly emphasize reason and individualism. These approaches include both the content and methods of communicating knowledge, which are still dominant in the fields of theology and religion. How do we transcend the Eurocentrism of theological education in order to allow more creativity and explore the epistemic potential of truly intercultural learning in global theological institutions and classrooms? How do we engage diversity taking into consideration the colonial difference in the classroom? How does colonial difference change from a topic of learning to a way of teaching, learning, and production of new knowledge? How do we deal with the colonial difference as an epistemic issue as well as an ethical question of justice in theological education? Is recognizing diversity and teaching postcolonial theories in religion and theology enough? There are a myriad of complex, interlocking issues that need to be taken into consideration if culturally pluralist and international schools of theology engage interculturality in theological education seriously.

Theological educator Gary Riebe-Estrella, quoted in the epigraph, argues that the necessary change in this area is much more fundamental and very challenging. Riebe-Estrella notes that

rarely does this underlying value system [Western Enlightenment] and its historical and cultural contextuality come up for faculty discussion and critique – understandably, though wrongly, so. For it is the value system that produced the educational system in which most faculty have been trained and which has shaped their understanding and practice of education. . . . To challenge the worldview is not only to introduce change but to threaten the fundamental stability of the educational enterprise. (2009, 23)

The author then raises the key question of “How might we get below the pedagogical waterline to the base of the educational iceberg?” and shares some insights based on his experience of engaging the border between Black and Hispanic theologies, to which I will return later (Riebe-Estrella 2009, 23).

Without ignoring the significant work for achieving racial justice in theological education and dealing with diversity, the focus of this essay will primarily be on the critique of the perennial dominant Eurocentric approach to teaching and learning in the classroom. This critique, in my opinion, should be an integral part of the broader analysis of theological education and diversity. The statement by Mignolo about the dominant and contested power of Western perspectives quoted in the epigraph is not a recent discovery. The work of unmasking dominant Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge and

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their interconnectedness with colonial power in all its forms, past and present, is also not new. Yet, not enough attention has been given so far to this question in the classroom context in relation to both *what* (content and knowledge) and *how* (pedagogy) we teach. Pedagogical awareness, diversifying the readings and voices in our syllabi, intercultural sensitivity activities, and the occasional addition of guest speakers who represent different cultural perspectives on certain areas in religion, theology, and ministry, are all important and common activities. However, the question remains whether these are sufficient for making theological education fundamentally less Eurocentric and truly intercultural.

In the following section, I will present a brief summary of some recent articles that reflect the significant progress made in the area of diversity and theological education. Then, using theoretical frameworks primarily from the field of cultural studies that have been advanced over the past few decades by the writings of several scholars on globalization, modernity/coloniality, and the geopolitics of knowledge, I will describe and discuss how this newly developed theoretical analysis might help us tackle the questions raised above around coloniality, interculturality, and knowledge in the classroom and in theological education in general.⁴

In the last part of this essay, using the example of teaching *Religion in Context*, a required course on religion and culture for all Master of Divinity students at Catholic Theological Union that I have regularly taught (or team-taught) for the last ten years, I will describe an instance of re-thinking/re-imagining theological education in light of the insights discussed above.⁵ I do not pretend here to propose a finished model of a decolonized educational practice. Rather, inspired by the debates on theological education and diversity, and the seriousness of this analysis and its theological, ethical, and social justice implications, the last part describes a modest effort at re-thinking and re-imagining that is still a work in progress. The essay will conclude by summarizing an emerging vision for epistemic decolonization, that I believe provides a new horizon and motivation for rethinking theological education from the perspective of interculturality/de-coloniality.

Colonial Difference in the Classroom

In “Fighting the Elephant in the Room: Ethical Reflections on White Privilege and Other Systems of Advantage in the Teaching of Religion,” Hill, Harris, and Martínez-Vázquez offer insightful pedagogical analysis and strategy for re-imagining teaching and nurturing a liberating education that takes the issues of social justice in the

⁴ The working group on globalization, modernity/coloniality and the geopolitics of knowledge has a long history, and involves several prominent international authors including Aníbal Quijano and Enrique Dussel, whose works will be indirectly engaged in this essay due to its limited scope and space. I will focus primarily on the works of Walter D. Mignolo cited in the reference list because of their relevance to my argument.

I am indebted to Prof. Lee Cormie at the faculty of theology of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, for introducing me to the writings of this working group, and for the long and stimulating conversations we had on these topics over the past years.

⁵ The department of Intercultural Studies and Ministry at CTU has for many years offered courses in the praxis of ministry that are inspired by similar philosophy and pedagogy. I learned a great deal from my colleagues in the department and other professors at CTU with whom I team-taught such courses.

classroom seriously. Re-imagining education in today's increasingly pluralistic society, contends Hill, "requires that educators be much more intentional about encountering 'difference' – different races, ethnicities, genders, and classes." Inspired by the "borderlands" epistemic metaphor of Gloria Anzuldúa, understood broadly as "emotionally-laden spaces where persons from different racial, ethnic, gender, and social class identities come into meaningful contact," Hill re-imagines the classroom in the U.S. context as a borderlands zone. Borderland encounters in the classroom, the author suggests, can contribute to "effectively confront[ing] the elephant in the room; namely, the complex nexus of systems of advantage, with a special focus on white privilege" (Harris et al. 2009, 4). The authors' pedagogical strategy builds mainly on (1) engaging students where they are, (2) helping them identify their identities and social locations, and (3) helping them acknowledge the reality of injustice and oppression, understood as "sanctioning and nurturing of systems of inequality that are woven throughout social institutions and embedded within individual consciousness" (Harris et al. 2009, 8).

The elephant in the room Hill, Harris, and Martínez-Vázquez describe is in many ways similar to and is part of the elephant I face in my classroom. However, there are some added features to the elephant that have become clearer to me over the past few years of teaching, as I wrestle with re-imagining theological education in a global context that engages colonial difference, which is a lived experience for me and many of the students in the classroom.

What I mean in this essay by colonial difference in the multi-racial, multicultural, international classroom is the dominant consensus, often very subtle and silent, that the different representations and systems of cultural knowledge by authors, students, professors, and so forth do not have the same value. The lack of awareness that this consensus is primarily historically shaped by colonial relations between peoples and cultures, I would argue, is also part of the colonial difference. In other words, the cultural, religious, and theological knowledge represented in the classroom are not equally valued. Using Mignolo's terms, persons who *come from different places*, and *think from different locations*, that is from different worldviews, are not interacting mutually (Mignolo 2007, 490–92). Retrospectively, I can say that in almost all the courses I took as a student in a variety of educational institutions, cultural contexts, and countries, and in the courses I taught, there is a hierarchy of systems and sources of knowledge, with the Western perspectives at the top of the pyramid, that is consistently affirmed in subtle, and sometimes unsubtle ways, as universal. This hierarchical relation shapes students' approach to "academic" knowledge, their relation to other students who come from *different places*, and to professors, the authority figures representing "academic" knowledge. Established over a long period of time between the West and the rest of the world, this situation is in my experience still very powerful and continues to prevail in our theology and religion classrooms today. Sanctioned by a dominant academic cultural consensus, silent and subtle in many ways, this reality strongly permeates all educational relations as I experience them (for example, theological curriculum, syllabi, disciplinary knowledge, as well as power relations in the classroom). This is what I am calling in this essay, broadly using Mignolo's term, the colonial difference in the classroom.

Usually, colonial relations are talked about in political, economic, or military terms. Cultural colonization, however, which involves colonized minds and educational systems (well articulated in the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon on colonization, and

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Edward Said on Orientalism, culture, and imperialism, among many others before and after them) is a deeper and long lasting form of colonial power. This form of colonial power is more subtle and more difficult to identify, resist, and transform. “In order to uncover the *perverse logic* – that Fanon pointed out – underlying the philosophical conundrum of modernity/coloniality and the political and economic structure of imperialism/colonialism,” notes Mignolo, “we must consider how to decolonize the ‘mind’ . . . and the ‘imaginary’ . . . that is knowledge and being” (Mignolo 2007, 450). In his article “On the Coloniality of Being: Contribution to the Development of a Concept,” Nelson Maldonado-Torres elucidates the meaning of coloniality as used by Mignolo and others in relation to knowledge and being in daily life. The author distinguishes this meaning of coloniality from the common understanding of colonialism. Coloniality, in the words of Maldonado-Torres,

refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday. (2007, 243)

According to Mignolo, even though the notion of decolonizing knowledge has been a topic of discussion in many academic disciplines since the seventies, it was the groundbreaking work of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano that “explicitly linked coloniality of power in the political and economic spheres with the coloniality of knowledge” (Mignolo 2007, 451; Quijano 2000; see also Quijano 1992). Following this argument, Mignolo asks how we decolonize knowledge. Again, using a concept developed by Quijano, the approach advanced by the author for decolonizing knowledge is described in terms of “Delinking.” Delinking, Mignolo explains,

presupposes to move toward a geo- and body politics of knowledge that on the one hand denounces the pretended universality of a particular ethnicity (body politics), located in a specific part of the planet (geo-politics), that is, Europe where capitalism accumulated as a consequence of colonialism. De-linking then shall be understood as a de-colonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluri-versality as a universal project. . . . [Delinking] leads to de-colonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics. ‘New inter-cultural communication’ should be interpreted as new inter-epistemic communication. (2007, 453)

From the perspective of Latin America, notes Mignolo, such a process of decolonizing the pretended universality and constructing new intercultural knowledge, is “understood in the constant double movement of unveiling the geo-political location of theology, secular philosophy and scientific reason and simultaneously affirming the modes and principles of knowledge that have been denied by the rhetoric of Christianization, civilization, progress, development, and market democracy” (2007, 463). Delinking as described above, argues the author, is potentially capable of fracturing the

epistemic hegemony of Western *theo and ego-politics of knowledge* and of changing the terms of the conversation (Mignolo 2007, 490).

These analyses and insights, I would argue, are helpful for shedding some light into a deeper understanding of the complex questions around interculturality and theological education, curriculum, pedagogy, and the multi-layered power relations in the classroom. Examining these insights in the classroom context will be the focus of the following part of this essay.

Toward an Intercultural, De-colonial Pedagogical Approach

The example I will use for making my reflection on teaching and learning in the culturally diverse classroom concrete is a course on religion and culture I have been regularly teaching, in one form or another, for the past ten years. In its current design, this required course is part of a newly revised curriculum and its objective is to help M.Div. students understand the cultural context of religion and the relationship between culture, spirituality, religion, religious experience, other religions, and theology. The course emphasizes the importance of understanding these relations as a primary context for the study of theology and the integration of theological knowledge. Because of the diversity of its student body and the school's global focus on mission and ministry, the M.Div. curriculum at CTU takes interculturality seriously.⁶ In the words of Stephen Bevans, a systematic theologian and leading member of the 2004 curriculum design team, "One cannot really do *Christian* theology today without a sense of rootedness in one's own culture, dialogue with other cultures, and dialogue with the world's religions" (Bevans 2008, 112).⁷ The course is one of four foundational courses that cover, in addition to religion and culture, non-conventional introductions to systematic theology, doing ministry, and Christian history. All four courses emphasize interculturality and are designed to complement each other in introducing the above mentioned vision of theological education to students. "The curriculum we developed," notes Bevans, "has at its core four principles: ministerial identity, a focus on *doing* theology rather than just knowing answers, a recognition of the contextual and interreligious nature of ministry and theology, and a knowledge and love of the Christian tradition," principles that are also consistent with ATS standards for the M.Div. program, adds the author (2008, 108). A main emphasis of the foundational courses, as well as of the rest of the curriculum, lies in offering an integrated theological education, that is an education that helps students make connections between historical and theoretical information, lived reality, and their

⁶ In a typical required M.Div. course the enrollment is usually about thirty students. About half of the students would be international, coming mainly from the global South, with a strong representation from Latin America, Africa and East and Southeast Asia. The rest of the students would normally be from the U.S. and would belong to different racial and ethnic backgrounds who come from urban, suburban and rural communities. Some of them come from racially and culturally mixed backgrounds and have lived in multicultural urban communities all their life. Students in this category do not identify themselves narrowly with a racial or ethnic group. Typically, there are more male than female students in our classrooms, primarily because the candidates for ordination to priesthood in the Roman Catholic tradition, who are the main constituency of the program, are all male. The age range of the students is pretty wide: it includes young seminarians in their mid twenties; lay, recent college graduates; members of religious communities of different ages; and men and women, who are mature professionals doing their M.Div. or MAPS as a second career.

⁷ In this article, Bevans includes an outline of the CTU M.Div. curriculum, which provides a good background for better understanding this section of my essay.

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personal and communal life experience, taking into consideration the complexities of the different perspectives in each of these areas, particularly in the new global context of North America. This set of courses, the type of students, the mandate of the curriculum, and the topics discussed provide an ideal opportunity for experimenting with new creative ways for dealing with the challenges of the dominant Eurocentric approach for the study of religion and theology.

In order to introduce the concept of interculturality as production of new knowledge, and help students make connections between the course and their personal experience, cultural knowledge, and context, one of the first assignments in the early part of the course is asking students to write a short paper on personal religious experience with particular attention to their own cultural context, where they grew up, and where they come from. This is the first movement in the course: connection with lived experience and students' cultural context, and introducing interculturality. This helps students realize that their personal and communal cultural experiences are sources of knowledge that require interpretation. They begin to appreciate the importance of this awareness for the theological knowledge about religion and culture before engaging "classical" theoretical frameworks. Students are normally organized in culturally diverse small working groups where they share their personal reflections and knowledge. Small groups provide an opportunity for learning from one another, which is an essential part of the learning process, and create a space for intercultural knowledge to emerge, evolve, and feed into the class discussion and final reflection papers. After dedicating a number of sessions to examining a variety of theoretical frameworks and historical development of concepts, the second written assignment in the course is to write a short paper that focuses on engaging personal experience with the discussed theoretical categories. This becomes another opportunity in the process of constructing intercultural knowledge.

Given the learning objectives and process of the course, finding textbooks for such a class is unthinkable.⁸ The course reader consists of a collection of articles from different cultural perspectives from around the world, which include a variety of interreligious theological views. Including such a wide variety of readings on a wide range of topics in one course, to say the least, is a very challenging task. In this case, the six faculty who have alternated in team-teaching this course over the past years, several of whom are people of color from within and outside the U.S., have all contributed to the compilation of the course reader. As part of its philosophy, the course is intentional about giving voice to historically oppressed and marginalized communities and peoples, from the U.S. as well as from other parts of the world. This is expressed in both the choice of readings, audiovisual material, and in creating an encouraging and trusting environment for students from such groups to speak in class about their personal and community's experience, if they choose to do so. Listening to these perspectives is key for pointing out the limits of dominant frameworks and is one of the eye-opening moments in the course for advancing intercultural learning.

⁸ Most textbooks on religion, including some of those recently written by open-minded and well-informed scholars, continue to evolve around the work of a few European and Euroamerican male scholars who dominate the conversation, which mostly focuses on Western academic debates on defining religion. Such perspectives are important partners in the conversation, but they should not continue to constitute the center around which the conversation on religion and culture evolves in the curriculum on religion.

The focus of the rest of the course is on developing a learning attitude for encountering the religious (and cultural) “other.” The main assignment for this part involves a small group visit to and participation in a religious service of another religion, which is not difficult to find in almost any neighborhood in Chicago. The site visit is not an ethnographical “participant observation” exercise; rather, it is intended to be a respectful encounter with a community of faith that has a different religious experience. Group visits culminate in writing a short descriptive (phenomenological) report and giving a half-hour class presentation on the group’s reactions and questions after their brief encounter with a religious “other.” This is usually an “a-ha” moment in the process. For many students, this could be the first time they step into the “sacred space” of another religion, which for some is like breaking a taboo. It is often the case that students – no matter where they come from – have been exposed in their early Christian education and socialization to a prejudiced theology of other religions. Learning to see the religious dignity and humanity of the other is a first step toward encounter and dialogue. A brief practice of these values during the visit is a liberating experience for most students. They begin to see and analyze their prejudice and this becomes an important first step of a process of interreligious and intercultural learning and transformation. This is new knowledge about the religion of the other. It is another way of learning about other religions that does not have as a starting point a preoccupation, common in dominant theologies of religion among seminary students, with what is a true religion and what is not, who is saved and who is not, who has the fullness of “Truth” and who does not, and who needs the Christian gospel to be saved and who does not.

After the group presentations, a class session is dedicated to discussing the relation to the cultural and religious “other” in students’ early religious education and cultural experience. In light of some analytical readings on understanding other religious worlds, students do a critical theological reflection on their formative experience of learning about other religions and cultures. We try to analyze and understand where the prejudiced theology comes from and why it has such a powerful grip on students’ minds. Colonial relations of Western Christianity to other world religions and cultures are also discussed from historical and theological perspectives with many examples from around the world. Many students also share their personal stories in this area. In an international, culturally diverse classroom, students have different experiences of living with people from other religions. Many students come from areas in the world where they experienced ethnic and religious conflicts, wars, and violence. Listening to the experience of these students gives the class an opportunity to discuss the question of religion and violence and why the same religions co-exist peacefully in one place and are at war in another.

The last class assignment is writing a final reflection paper that includes a summary of the learning from the course, critical personal reflection engaging some of the reading material, and an articulation of the challenges of the course. In addition to learning basic skills for doing cultural analysis of religion and connecting personal and communal experience to knowledge from the fields of religion and culture, some of the learning outcomes of the course at the personal level include healing and transformation, which are often expressed in students’ final class sharing and papers. A new theological vision of intercultural and interreligious dialogue that makes room for the “other” helps students restore the dignity of the religious and cultural other in their consciousness. Since many of our students come from areas in the world where cultural, religious, and ethnic tensions, conflicts, wars, and violence have contributed to

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shaping their worldview, this new learning experience becomes for some an opportunity for empowerment, healing of their memories, and for re-imagining cultural and religious reconciliation. Reading students' final papers is always a deep learning experience for me. I consider it a privilege to be able to read the summary of their new learning, breakthroughs, and transformation, as well as to learn about their challenges, frustrations, resistance, and fears. For me personally, accompanying students during such an intellectual, academic, and personally transformative learning process for a semester is both empowering and challenging because their journey, in many ways, is also my journey.

The philosophy and method of the course consider the students in the classroom as a learning community. Students are invited to be active participants in the learning process and production of new knowledge, and not be passive recipients of knowledge from the professors' banks of information and textbooks.⁹ Through intensive small group work, focused class discussions, readings from several perspectives from around the world on the topic, and writing reflection papers, the class opens a space for students to *do* intercultural theology, and not only *talk* or *hear* about it. From a de-colonial perspective, awakening and engaging seriously the thinking of students who bring different knowledge from their respective traditions and the experience and wisdom of their peoples and communities is crucial. This way of constructing knowledge shifts the focus from abstract thinking that values individualism and ideas from dominant theoretical frameworks to a way of learning that is rooted in cultural experiences in conversation with multiple theoretical frameworks. It is often the case that students from non-Western cultures feel pressured, in many subtle ways and for a variety of reasons, to use Western academic ideas and frameworks to interpret their own experience and cultural context. This approach, which is very common in theological education, is not conducive to integrated learning, alienates learners from their experience and cultural knowledge, and perpetuates coloniality. On the other hand, when students are respected, given theoretical tools, and a space to explore their experience in a particular course that is relevant to this approach of learning, they develop a positive attitude regarding the wisdom and knowledge of other traditions and peoples, their findings become part of a communal process of constructing new knowledge. As a result, intercultural learning begins to happen and coloniality is challenged. For example, when students from different Asian, Latin American, and African countries bring new knowledge about the interaction between traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity in their home communities and cultures, which is substantially different from the interactions between religions and cultures in the U.S. context, many commonly held notions about relations among religions, civilized and uncivilized cultures, violent and peaceful religions, just to name a few areas, are fundamentally challenged. The new knowledge offers an opportunity for intercultural communication and engaging "border thinking" in the classroom that broadens everybody's perspective. In this sense, such a learning space opens an opportunity for de-coloniality and de-linking from dominant categories and ways of thinking discussed earlier.

⁹ The influential works by Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire, in particular his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the international schools of thought on liberating education that built on Freire's work made significant contributions to advancing the above mentioned approach to education. See for example Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (1987).

As mentioned above, the concepts of “coloniality” and “de-linking” are much broader and more complex analytical frameworks than the limited scope of this article. And for obvious reasons, achieving an intercultural, de-colonized theological education cannot be done in one course; this has to become the general theoretical orientation of the whole theological curriculum and learning environment, and is a life-long process.

Conclusion

It is only recently in my teaching experience that I have been able to name more clearly the colonial difference and its impact on the dynamics of teaching and learning as well as on knowledge production in the classroom. This new perspective on teaching and learning, which has significantly expanded my view of the elephant in my classroom, constantly challenges me to broaden my analysis and search for new insights on how to address the topic of interculturality in the classroom and the theological curriculum in general. “Coloniality” has become a significant hermeneutical key for understanding the dynamics of colonial difference, particularly from an epistemic perspective in a global theological classroom. In my opinion, this is an urgent conversation for theological education because of its global, intercultural dimensions (see Mignolo 1993 and 1999; Dussel 2002 and 2009). In the words of Dussel, “The struggle for epistemic de-coloniality lies, precisely, here: de-linking from the most fundamental belief of modernity: the belief in abstract universals through the entire spectrum from the extreme right to the extreme left” (Mignolo 2007, 500).

The dominant Eurocentric universality claim must continue to be challenged and dismantled in order to make room for other religious and theological traditions to become included as partners in an authentic and mutual intercultural dialogue. Such a dialogue, in Dussel’s words,

will enable us to understand many aspects unknown to us, aspects that may be better developed in some traditions than in others. This dialogue will play a key role in unlocking the contents of the daily life of humanity in other cultures, . . . [and] will make it possible for us to transcend the Eurocentrism of modernity, so prevalent today, which impedes creativity and often obscures the great discoveries achieved by other traditions. (2009, 499–500)

What Dussel says about dialogue between the world’s philosophical traditions is equally relevant to dialogue among religious and theological traditions. How we bring this dialogue to the level of the theological curriculum, syllabi, pedagogy, and transform colonial power relations of theological knowledge in the seminary classroom will continue to be a main challenge to theological education and educators for a long time.

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