



Accomplice

De-Linking Christian Missions and Empire: Decolonial Options for Christian Humanitarian Work

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In the Summer of 2020, my Integration Lab (iLab) team at the Keough School of the University of Notre Dame partnered with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in their endeavor to accompany displaced persons around the world on their journey to create a new “home.” CRS seeks to focus their organizational strategy on more holistic definitions of “homes and communities” rather than the simple provision of the house as a physical structure or food and water as commodities. Recognizing increasing movement of people due to wars and conflict, CRS claims to continue its historical mission to assist the poor and vulnerable overseas.

In this essay, I explore tensions between historical Christian missionary work and modern Christian-based humanitarian relief work using CRS as a case study. The first section of this essay explores CRS’s stated history, mission, and its Grand Bargain commitment to localization. The second section explores the rise of Christian missionary ethics as the hegemonic system of the humanitarian sector and links between Christian mission discourse and coloniality. It also challenges claims to the Local Turn. The third section of this essay analyzes mission-based humanitarian and development agencies through a decolonial lens and iterates decolonial alternatives for Christian humanitarian and development agencies.

I. The Mission Underlying CRS Development Work

CRS was established in 1943 by Catholic Bishops in the United States to help World War II survivors and refugees. From the beginning, CRS, then called War Relief Services, sought to “assist people based on need, regardless of race, creed or nationality.”¹ They worked in partnership with local organizations, particularly Catholic Church agencies. On July 1st, 1943, CRS’s first project helped accompany over 1,500 Polish refugees to Colonia Santa Rosa, Mexico, where CRS set up a haven for education, training and rehabilitation. The project lasted four years. CRS also provided millions with shipments of surplus food, clothing, and medicine to war-torn areas of south Asia during the Partition of India in 1947,

¹ <https://www.crs.org/about/mission-statement>.

Korea after the Korean war in 1953, and North Vietnam after the Partition of Vietnam in 1954. In 1955, War Relief Services formally changed its name to Catholic Relief Services after shifting its mission from war relief to long-term development. According to their website, CRS claims that during this shift, “the idea of using U.S. food aid to affect real change—including improved health and education, and sustainable livelihoods and farming—took hold.”² This led the CRS to turn towards “development.”

Post-WWII when colonies around the world revolted for independence, CRS proudly claims they fought for more than superficial peace, that they forged partnerships to address world poverty while promoting justice, development and a respect for human dignity for global development efforts. On March 26th, 1967, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical *Populorum progressio*, which declared development as “the new name for peace,” underscoring the tenets of Catholic social teaching and integral human development. In light of the Balkan Conflict and Rwandan genocides of the 1990’s, CRS was challenged to deepen their commitment to Catholic social teaching and focus on social justice endeavors. The organizational history of CRS informs its current mission, approach, and project plans.

Inspired by its mission to assist the poor and vulnerable overseas and its Guiding Principles rooted in Catholic social teaching, CRS is currently advancing a new agency strategy. Their 2030 vision imagines “a world in which all people—with a preferential option for the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized—have opportunities to fulfill their [holistic] human potential.” Asking those most impacted by vulnerabilities to vocalize what they seek for recovery is in line with their “subsidiary” principle and Integral Human Development principles, which includes a Preferential Option for the Poor.³ On its Catholic Identity website page, CRS says it works with over 100 countries around the world to assist people of all backgrounds through local organizations to provide emergency services, asserting that “in 2018, 93% of all revenues was spent on programs that benefit the poor overseas. About 35% of programming focuses on emergency relief and recovery,” and the rest for rebuilding, reconstruction and reclamation of locals’ lives.⁴ Lastly, as a signatory to the Grand Bargain, an initiative led by National and International NGOs to practically implement changes to the way humanitarian systems operate to enable more locally-led responses, CRS is committed to “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary recognizing that international humanitarian actors play a vital role particularly in situations of armed conflict.” Grand Bargain signatories seek to “engage with local and national responders in a spirit of partnership and aim to reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities.”⁵ To note, CRS explicitly states it does not proselytize as an organization, but that it does subscribe to Catholic social and moral teaching. CRS seeks to “ensure that all funds under CRS’ direct control are used only for purposes complying with [those] teachings.”⁶

² <https://www.crs.org/about/crs-history>.

³ <https://www.crs.org/about/guiding-principles>.

⁴ <https://www.crs.org/about/catholic-identity>.

⁵ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/more-support-and-funding-tools-for-local-and-national-responders>.

⁶ <https://www.crs.org/about/catholic-identity>.

II. Defining the ties to colonial ethics

While I was initially intrigued by CRS's theory of change and committed to their ambitious efforts, I was left to ponder some aspects of their operations that perpetuate colonial norms. The first colonial aspect of CRS's operations is its emphasis on "development." In his second inaugural speech, US President Harry Truman defined the "invention" of development. He says:

Old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans... All countries, including [the US], will greatly benefit from a constructive program for the better use of the world's human and natural resources... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace... [through] a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge.⁷

From this perspective, modernity and development are viewed as a single epistemology inseparably bound to the European colonial project. It is homogenizing, Eurocentric, hierarchical, racializing, and operationalizes binary categorizations of being. CRS's emphasis on development is thus its first tie to coloniality.

CRS's Catholic identity is its second colonial aspect. Decolonial theorist Santiago Slabodsky discusses how "from the very beginning of modernity, [there was a] discourse of altruistic Christian love that was incapable of recognizing the difference of other communities than themselves, and accordingly made the recognition of the humanity of these communities dependent upon submission to the ardent Christian mandate." Modernity emerged from the religiously-justified genocides and epistemicides of the long 16th century (1450-1650 CE). Coloniality naturalizes modernity's violences and Eurocentric hierarchies by rendering alternative knowledges (and those who possess them) invisible. Modernity's Eurocentric epistemology/ racism/ sexism is embedded in global social, economic, and political structures through centuries of colonial domination.

One must recognize monopolistic hegemony of Christianity is a consequence of coloniality. Contemporary scholars have roundly condemned missionaries for playing essential roles in the construction of colonial mentalities and exploitative structures among nonwestern peoples.⁸ Shakespeare Sigamoney in "The Double Face of Christian Mission and Education in India from Dalit and Decolonial Perspectives" discusses how missionaries did, in fact, bring modern education to India and provided the Dalits access to Western education, leading to social upliftment. While some missionaries spoke against the social evils of their time, particularly the caste system in India, many missionaries "highlighted the Brahmanic religion as a pan-India religion, placing popular religions in a disadvantaged position" and participated in epistemic violence once again. Missionaries' work on a unified religion called Hinduism is a motivator of Hindu nationalism and fundamentalism today. By homogenizing the people of India as Hindus, missionaries helped colonized people stand against the empire in a uniform way, but then used homogenization to suppress minority religious beliefs in the Republic of India.⁹ Missionaries also did translations for the British

⁷ https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/truman.asp.

⁸ Brown, S. J. (2010). Dana L. Robert (ed.). 2008. *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities*.

⁹ Sigamoney, S. (2020). The Double Face of Christian Mission and Education in India from Dalit and Decolonial Perspectives. *International Review of Mission*, 109(1), 11.

colonial government to maintain control and become powerful through assertion of bureaucratic systems, including educational institutions.¹⁰ Missionaries in the imperial era willfully participated in the construction of European and American colonialism. Analyzing the colonial nature of mission discourse provides descriptions of the third critical link that CRS possesses with coloniality.

Sigamony discusses how “the mission works have allowed the caste system to enter the church...within the Christian fold, the association between caste and patriarchy is established by the fact that it is the caste churches which are opposed to the ordination of women.”¹¹ Religions like Christianity need liberation from the caste system; only then can religion be a source of liberation. African theologians and academics highlight the fact that “missionary discourse embedded and stabilized the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism without directly supporting them. The colonialist discourse had a significant influence on Western/northern/European missionary education and its accompanying theological imagination, which was constructed as essentially ‘monolithic and assimilating.’”¹² Theologians explain the mission engagement from the West to the “rest” has no desire or expectation of reciprocity because the Other is not deemed civilized enough to teach or enlighten the West.¹³

Othring is another reflection of Christian agencies’ (like CRS) ties to coloniality. This Othring is evidenced in how international NGOs are often the fastest and largest responders of humanitarian emergencies even though Southern NGOs are uniquely placed to more effectively respond to the needs in their communities.¹⁴ Many local organizations complain about the vacuum effect of large NGOs arriving for one emergency then moving on to the next large-scale emergency elsewhere, significantly reducing their operations and resources once the immediate crisis is past. Though local NGOs need support in their institutional development, many churches in the South are concerned when Northern church-related agencies provide support to local secular NGOs. They are upset when Northern church-related agencies send expatriate staff to carry out operations in their countries, often without consulting them.

This crisis demonstrates a preference by Western agencies for Western personnel and models of leadership rather than local models that are more appropriate. Questions of accountability between Northern and Southern organizations have been a major issue with this model. In the 1980s, for example, there was great concern within the network of church-related agencies with links to the WCC about the concept of “ecumenical discipline” – a common understanding about relations between churches and church-related agencies that especially focused on solidarity and accountability.¹⁵ Attempts were made to develop such guidelines to mutual relations that would benefit local organizations, but “the

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 11-12.

¹² Kaunda, C. J., & Hewitt, R. R. (2015). Toward epistemic decolonial turn in missio-formation in African Christianity. *International Review of Mission*, 104(2), 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ferris, E. (2005). Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations. *Int'l Rev. Red Cross*, 325.

¹⁵ Ibid., 319.

pressures of professionalism and the competitive marketplace” largely prevented the implementation of these guidelines.¹⁶

The capacities of local churches and organizations are seldom developed nor made central in faith-based humanitarian relief efforts. Several decolonial scholars have demanded the unpacking of the Local Turn, like Thania Paffenholz,¹⁷ Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P Richmond.¹⁸ We must understand what the localization process is, and *who* institutions mean when they refer to “the locals.” As a unique method of channeling emergency assistance, the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation developed a North-South alliance of churches and their related organizations called “Action by Churches Together” (ACT) in 1995. ACT seeks to build the capacity of local church-related organizations to respond to emergencies in their own countries. Yet, in spite of this capacity-building component for local organizations, approximately two-thirds of the approximately US \$80 million allocated every year for emergencies is channeled through Northern church-related agencies.¹⁹ Scholars beckon us to think about who, and in what conditions, development and humanitarian organizations privilege when they seek to “localize.” Like the aforementioned case of India, institutions may be working only with the local elite, those who represent a local dominant religion or group and seek to maintain hierarchies of coloniality. In another example, Dr. Atalia Omer describes in the CRS “Interreligious Action for Peace: Studies in Muslim-Christian Cooperation” report, colonization comes in a variety of forms—one such form is its legal and bureaucratic logic. She explains, “the colonial infrastructure’s legacy of privileging Christian settlers and commercial agendas over and against Muslim and other indigenous communities endures in contemporary land disputes, which are at the epicenter of the broader conflict in Mindanao [Philippines].”²⁰ This is an example of how colonial privilege and racialization continues to shape local dynamics. Thus, one must practice seeing localization efforts, like that of CRS, through a critical lens. This showcases how, most pertinently, when INGOs like CRS work with local church communities, one must be careful not to idolize “localization” efforts.

Dr. Cecelia Lynch and Dr. Tanya B. Schwarzs provide a few counter-arguments to faith-based organizations in the provision of aid. The question of whether and how aid helps or harms recipient populations, sometimes referred to as “the great aid debate,” increasingly includes discussions of the impact faith-based organizations (FBOs) or religious humanitarians have. Lynch and Schwarzs recognize that FBOs, especially Christian organizations, have a high propensity to proselytize and the problematic nature of proselytism in vulnerable communities.²¹ However, they argue that the focus on religious agents’ proselytism alone indicates a secularist presumption and lack of knowledge about the complexity of religious ethics that 1) tend to mask significant differences among

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Paffenholz, T. (2015). Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research. *Third world quarterly*, 36(5).

¹⁸ Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. P. (2013). The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace. *Third world quarterly*, 34(5).

¹⁹ Ferris, 320.

²⁰ Omer, A. (2017). Interreligious action as a driver for social cohesion and development. *Interreligious action for peace: Studies in Muslim-Christian cooperation*, 6.

²¹ Lynch, C., & Schwarz, T. B. (2016). Humanitarianism’s proselytism problem. *International Studies Quarterly*, 60(4), 1.

Christian groups in their ethics of aid and 2) prevent scholars from addressing “donor proselytism”– an additional form of undue pressure in aid provision.²² Critics assume aid should be framed in secular (i.e. non-religious) terms only, and that any inclusion of religion only serves the nefarious purposes of conversion. This prevents sufficient examination of additional, and very potent, forms of pressure on aid deliverers and recipients. Lynch and Schwads present their findings from interviews with Christian groups around the world that found not only are there contestations among Christian humanitarians about what constitutes proselytism, but also that donor pressures are far more pervasive of the two in shaping aid to conform to neoliberal (symptomatic of coloniality) conceptions of efficiency, sustainability and measurable results. They argue, “scholars and policymakers should take into account the complexity of religious ethics regarding proselytism as well as the power of donor proselytism to affect the lives of those receiving humanitarian assistance.”²³

Many religious societies, especially Islamic societies, integrate spiritual life into other aspects of life. Like Christians, they believe charity is a way of life. Islamic NGOs have a difficult time understanding humanitarian gestures outside the scope of religious values, considering that religion is the guarantor of morals, charity, good behavior and virtue. Islamic actors “cannot conceive of self-respecting Western humanitarian NGOs as anything other than religious inspired.”²⁴ Thus, Christian and Muslim NGOs have an opportunity to strategically coordinate value-based engagements across a variety of communities, including engagement with authoritative religious leaders and elders, to reduce social ills and involve these key stakeholders in other grassroots mechanisms for advocacy and protection.²⁵

It is also true that the activities of evangelical Christian groups in traditionally Islamic societies have a negative impact on inter-faith relations. An example of this is the aftermath of the 2005 tsunami in Indonesia (containing the largest Muslim population in the world). Evangelical groups attempted to bring the Gospel as well as relief to Muslims affected, leading to distrust and criticism of the work of *all* Christians. While the Council of Churches in Indonesia issued a strong statement proceeding, dissociating itself from evangelical groups working in tsunami-affected areas and emphasizing respect for the religious beliefs of those assisted, the damage had been done. Locals continue to fear the underlying Christianizing efforts alongside relief provided by visibly Christian missionary groups. Thus, the skepticism that Western international FBOs and NGOs like CRS would receive can be explained by coloniality in two fold. One, it is difficult for people in the South/ “East” to easily accept help from workers of Northern organizations, who are perceived to be the colonizers’ descendants. And two, it is difficult for other religious societies, Muslim societies in particular, to trust the help of Christian organizations given the history of colonialism and evangelism around the world.

This does not mean that Christian humanitarian organizations must give up their Christian identities. As Dr. Omer explains, mainstreaming religion can in fact open up

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ghandour, A. R. (2003). Humanitarianism, Islam and the West: contest or cooperation?. *Humanitarian Exchange*, 25 (December).

²⁵ Omer, 16. (2017).

avenues to connect with religious communities and marginalized groups left behind in secular, mainstream efforts, based on common values.²⁶ Furthermore, studies show that FBO mechanisms are often the easiest mechanism for the government to use to reach those usually unreached, and, therefore, more in need.²⁷ However, navigating coloniality requires more than dialogue and “localization” by geographic localization. It requires active interrogation of the ways in which Northern Christian organizations perpetuate coloniality by flattening religions, including Islam, as being naturally “fundamental” and problematic, rather than addressing the underlying economic, political, cultural and symbolic grievances. It also requires intentional unpacking of what it means to “work with locals” and acknowledgement of the Christian hegemony to understand how colonial instruments like homogenization, monopolism, and racialized hierarchies are maintained at the local level.

Another related counterargument addresses the possibility of a Christian rebellion. Many Christian reform efforts and theological interrogations have been offered from Latin America via Liberation Theology and African missio-formation discourse. Decolonial theorist Santiago Slabodsky explains how the Christian hegemony, which showcases the strength of Christian dualism even in the most radical decolonial critiques of the field, symbolizes how the decolonization of the philosophy of religion/Christianity is the “halo of the decolonization of the modern project of coloniality.”²⁸ Meaning, it is *essential* that we invest in a Christian rebellion that counters projects of modernity, hierarchy and universalism/ evolutionism as a cornerstone of decolonial work.

However, Dr. Slabodsky is skeptical of the ways in which decolonial philosophy of religion largely becomes a narrow conversation of Christians talking with Christians about Christianity in Christian terms. He underlines how “both the narratives of the perpetrator [of harms] and those of the victim... can only be heard if they are expressed in Christian secularized theological language.” It should be concerning when a field, like the philosophy of religion monopolized by Christian thought, cannot find “partners of conversation beyond themselves.” We must examine whether other thought partners do not exist for it, or whether the frames of reference are “by default dualistically exclusionary.”²⁹ He further argues why Liberation Theology is not an effective tool for the decolonization of the philosophy of religion because traditional sources of Liberation Theology are in dialogue with Euro-Marxism (with an emphasis on Euro-Marxism in the continent or in settler-colonial states across the world) that often fails to realize the material constructions of race and the existence of any resources outside of the alleged Christian totality.

According to the framework of Liberationists, there is a systemic totality that no individual or community escapes, whereby the system develops its own demise when those conscious of their oppression have “nothing to lose but their chains.” This system of totality then assumes, for example, “if an individual living in Africa was kidnapped and made ‘slave’ and ‘Black’ by Christians, the liberation will happen within a system that only provides

²⁶ Ibid., 18.

²⁷ Ferris, 317. (2005).

²⁸ Slabodsky, S. (2020). Christian Hegemonies: Evolutionism, Analectics, and the Question of Interreligiosity in a Decolonial Philosophy of Religion. *Decolonial Philosophy of Religion*. Yountae, An and Eleanor Craig. Forthcoming, 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

Christianity... as the sources for rebellion.”³⁰ Aside from the fact that Liberation Theology is a fringe theology in contemporary Christendom, such methodological strategies presuppose that rebellion is confined to the space set by coloniality and the collectivity/ solidarity among rebels can only be understood after colonization. Dr. Slabodsky points out that “in extreme cases, this would justify the Eurocentric perception that only Europe was able to connect peoples around the world and... that colonization, slavery, rape and extractivism were necessary conditions for people with no history to welcome civilization.”³¹ This is hauntingly similar to popular messaging of humanitarian organizations “connecting people around the world” through various globalizing/ globalization efforts like development and relief work. We must ask ourselves, do we need capitalism and global humanitarian and development efforts to achieve global connection/ civilization?

III. Decolonial options to de-link Christian mission-based work from legacies of coloniality

1. Decolonize Missio-formation:

Marginalized theologians, like the Dalits, claim that redemption of a religion is necessary before its principles can be used for liberatory work.³² Through the World Council of Churches’ new mission statement, “Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” (TTL), African Christian theologians propose the development of a theory of missio-formation. Missio-formation “interrogates the misuse of power and use of the wrong kind of power in mission and in the church and argues for a new missional order that empowers the powerless and challenges the powerful.” Researchers Smillie and Minear point out that many faith groups embrace a justice agenda and, while not necessarily choosing sides in a given conflict, “do not make the principle of neutrality their first and great commandment.”³³ Some Christian organizations providing relief assistance in Sudan, for example, also supported southern Sudan’s quest for greater autonomy.³⁴ This shows excellent potential for the cultivation of a decolonial theological imagination that is about “confronting, unthinking, and undoing hidden and disclosed Eurocentric mono-cultural ideological discourse with its colonialist underpinnings.”³⁵ There is growing interest in how missio-formation can expose and give critical attention to how missions (including discourse and theologies) have “functioned as colonialist mechanisms for colonizing African Christian minds and subjectivity.”³⁶ The TTL statement takes seriously the issue of marginality and proposes a missional model that empowers the powerless and challenges the powerful through a process of opposition and struggle. Missio-formation calls for Christians to build visions beyond the colonial system that perpetuates “profoundly misguided concepts of law and order” through its use of “hierarchical dichotomies and categorical logic.” There must include a pedagogical emphasis on intellectual dissent, and possibly turn to colleagues from Critical Muslim Studies, decolonial Jewish philosophers, Dalit Theology, and African Christian Theology.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Ibid., 5.

³² Ibid., 11.

³³ Ferris, 317.

³⁴ Ibid., 319.

³⁵ Kaunda, C. J. & Hewitt, 5.

³⁶ Ibid., 1.

2. Decolonize Options for the Poor (i.e. a Praxis-oriented model of solidarity)

There must be a decolonization of the popularized application of the Options for the Poor principle to be a more political, praxis-oriented model of solidarity. It is not enough to be in dialogue with the vulnerable and provide aid to the poor first; aid must be strategic and anti-oppressive, given in ways that do not “affirm oppressive social systems or help the colonial powers to control and dominate the locals.”³⁷ One option is to witness the praxis of Dalit theology. Dalit theology was born in the context of the oppressive caste system. The “indigenous theology” in India was called Indian Christian theology, for which the frame of reference was the dominant caste ideologies. Because Dalits are outside the caste system, entirely erased as a peoples in civil society, Dalit theology has a particular praxis through the assertion of Dalit subjectivity in their history. In Dalit theology, “Christ is seen as a Dalit—an outcast marginalized by society. God therefore identifies with the suffering of the Dalits, who are oppressed by the Caste system.”³⁸ Thus, pain and pathos are central to Dalit theology and lay the foundations for their praxis of liberation. Dalit theology, like Black theology, Minjun theology, and Latin American liberation theology, stands against oppressive systems that deny human dignity. While the voices of colonial power dehistoricize and invisibilize it, Dalit theologians seek to rehistoricize themselves through the lens of decolonization.³⁹ African theologians also emphasize the importance of public pedagogy in missio-formation. They explain how “social movements such as the women’s movement, gender justice, human rights, human dignity, homosexual rights, animal rights, and climate justice are ‘critical signs of the time’ that must be discerned wisely.”⁴⁰ The social movements and their praxis-oriented models of solidarity with the struggles of people are embodied decolonizing discourses that can inform missio-formation’s new direction. Ultimately, they point out, “the Jesus movement was embedded in the hidden text of de-imperialization and decolonization that informed many popular movements of Jesus’s day.”⁴¹

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³⁷ Sigamoney, 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 11.

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ Kaunda, C. J. & Hewitt, 11.

⁴¹ Ibid.