



HOW CAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES ASSIST ANGLO-INDIAN WOMEN IN UNDERSTANDING AND ARTICULATING THEIR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES?

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ABSTRACT

The following essay is an adaptation of a graduate essay on ‘contextual theology’ – a sphere of study that attempts to read the bible through the eyes of marginalized people such as woman and minorities. This piece accordingly examines the religious experiences of Anglo Indian woman against new theologies and theoretical research.

“Started by exploitation, ended by assimilation”, might be the epigraph on the Anglo-Indian grave, a people whose abrupt extinction may have been predicted by its happenstance birth. The eulogy of this obscure community will be a tale of irony, an unintentional species of Western colonialism that was subsumed by the Western world four hundred years later. Behind this sociological autopsy historians will find a proud people of eclectic ancestry, a group who fused their divergent ethnic and cultural affiliations into a distinctive ethos that has never been theologically characterized.

In what ways did the cultural makeup of the Anglo-Indian community shape the religious experience of its women? Phrased more purposefully, how can contextual theologies assist these women in understanding and articulating their religious experiences? These are important questions because the particulars of Anglo-Indian history allow its women to contribute uniquely to the emerging voice of postcolonial feminist theology. A worthwhile starting point in this conversation is to chart the relationship between colonialism and the Anglo-Indian people to which it gave rise.

The origins of the Anglo-Indian community can be traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when European explorers colonized the areas of Asia known today as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Among the many ripples of the East-West clash were legitimate and illegitimate sexual unions between European traders and indigenous women (Gaikwad, 13). The historical record on the latter point speaks to the thorny qualities of Anglo-Indian identity, since any celebration of its eclectic lineage must be counterbalanced by recognizing that some of the first mothers of the community were coerced, raped, and slaved by its first fathers (Gaikwad, 14).

The interracial unions that blossomed during colonization gave rise to a number of mixed-ethnic groups throughout Southeast Asia, which slowly coalesced into a single community eventually termed the Anglo-Indians. In most respects this community of mixed-decent was accepted by neither European leaders nor native locals, but were nevertheless favored by the British rulers for coveted government positions because of their Christian background, English fluency, and lighter skin color (Gaikwad, 63). Thus, for example, members of the community were instrumental in the construction of the Indian railway system in the 19th and 20th centuries (Gaikwad, 29).

The Anglo-Indian people experienced enormous hardship when India obtained its independence in 1947, during which time the country's social hierarchy predictably flipped (Blunt, 12). In consolidating their newfound authority and autonomy, the indigenous Indian population rapidly marginalized their non-indigenous counterparts, and, as a result, approximately half the Anglo-Indian community immigrated to the United Kingdom, Australia and North America within a decade of Indian liberation (Gaikwad, 17).

The Anglo-Indian people comfortably migrated to their new surroundings according to contemporary research (Gaikwad, 13). Undoubtedly, the Christian-English heritage of the community's forefathers was a key factor in easing this integration, and statistics reveal that nearly 90% of the community now marry outside it (Gaikwad, 19). This fact, when seen through the lens of Gaikwad's demanding definition of a social equal as "one that you will be willing to have your son or daughter marry" (Gaikwad, 20), testifies to the completeness of this assimilation and

the degree to which the extinction of this community is inevitable.

This brief historical recount of the Anglo-Indian people brings to light two important theological points. First, while the community underwent periods of exploitation and marginalization throughout its history, the community itself was a direct product of colonization. Second, the interracial makeup of this obscure people places them at an interesting point along colonialist axis, allowing for unique contributions to the postcolonial theological discussion.

Any sincere reflection of the religious experience of Anglo Indian females must begin by placing itself in the shadows of colonialism. During this time the Bible was used to justify European military conquests against foreign lands and to promulgate Western notions of superiority against ‘heathen’ indigenous cultures (Kung, 11). The act of colonization became fused with the ways in which it was theologically validated, and Westernization and Christianization became largely synonymous. Indigenous women fell prey to inexcusable transgressions such as rape and murder in the name of the Gospel, and local girls were violently taken from their homes and educated in white institutions. While Christianity was intended to save such woman from exploitative native practices, it significantly marginalized them in other ways (Kung, 27).

So sustained and vivid were the forms of colonial oppression that pundits coined the word ‘kyriarchy’ to describe it (Kwok, 56). This term points to the unequal, exploitative and totalitarian rule of an emperor over his or her subordinates, which in the case of colonialism gave rise to “comprehensive, interlocking and multilayered” forms of repression (Kwok, 56). As African and Asian colonies moved towards independence, it became clear that a distinct theology was needed to appraise the centuries-long kyriarchies that such countries had endured.

Postcolonial theology attempts to formulate a Christian understanding of the effects of colonialism using a myriad of critical tools such as biblical exegesis, historical analysis and contextual theological reflection. Because of the multilayered effects of kyriarchical oppression, the theological themes of postcolonial persuasion overlap with those found in liberation, critical, feminist, and black theology. In specific, postcolonial theology sets for itself the following goals (Kwok, 22):

- It raises pointed questions with regard to biblical interpretations that fueled colonial pursuits and the complicity of religious scholars in tendering such interpretations.
- It focuses its exegesis on colonial concerns, such as the power differentials between biblical communities and kyriarchial modes of oppression.
- It eschews romantic pursuits for uncorrupted native cultures and instead argues that indigenous people must ‘appropriate’ colonial realities into their personal and cultural identities.
- It suggests that indigenous populations must ‘decolonize their minds’ by reinterpreting the biblical texts through the eyes of native traditions divorced from the European-centric readings that sustained colonial forms of oppression.

A more particular form of this theological discipline is postcolonial feminist theology, which examines colonial questions from the specific perspective of the women it marginalized. In general, two voices have emerged within this scholarly sphere: European women of colonial ancestry, and indigenous women of colonized ancestry. The contributions of both these groups in understanding the plight of colonial women are significant.

The first stream of postcolonial feminist theology can be seen as corrective; an admittance of the injustices that females leveled at their foreign sisters during periods of colonialism. Appalled at the treatment of native women, Christian missionaries established all-girl schools, catechism classes, and women’s Bible study classes to “save brown women from brown men” (Kwok, 17). Within this context, female missionaries promulgated traditional colonial ideologies that portrayed the West as the center of all cultural good while simultaneously typecasting foreign cultures as substandard (Kung, 49). Moreover, the relationship between European and indigenous women in the context of their ‘edification’ were colored along the lines of race and culture:

Caught in the politically charged colonial space defined by race and class, these white women were not natural allies of native women. To protect their identity and to minimize the danger of native women’s usurping their superior position, it was advantageous not to stress commonality of gender, but to exaggerate racial and class distinctions. (Kwok, 18)

Whereas as the first and second iterations of feminist theology challenged patriarchy in the both the Church and society, postcolonial European feminism is sensitive to the ways in which indigenous cultures were eclipsed because of colonial notions of White supremacy. Central to this branch of theology is the concept of the ‘appropriation of culture’, which “upholds neither a nostalgic nor a romanticized notion of one’s heritage, but argues for a critical appropriation such that the past is constantly open to new interpretations” (Kwok, 17).

In admitting that the ideals of Victorian womanhood were unjustly projected onto foreign women, the ‘colonialist’ version of this theology encourages victimized women to ‘do their own theology’ by favoring hermeneutics that are sensitive to postcolonial concerns such as “hybridity, deterritorialization, and hyphenated or multiple identities” (Kwok, 79). This theology also endorses ‘imperialist-checks’ against traditional and contextual exegesis to determine if these forms of analysis “support colonizing ideology by glossing over the imperial context and agenda” (Kwok, 83).

In sum, ‘colonialist’ postcolonial feminism encourages exegetical approaches that highlight the imperialist-bent of traditional scriptural readings, and extract postcolonial teachings that speak to the women marginalized by colonization. It leaves the exegesis and application, however, to its ‘colonized’ sister theology.

The second flavor of postcolonial feminist theology – that performed by the colonized – begins with the process of ‘decolonization’ in which women of the Third world reclaim and appropriate their personal and cultural identities (Kwok, 81). This process starts with the recognition that conquered women in the Third world were victims of *double colonization*, in that they were sexually exploited by foreign men while also being stripped of their native ways of life. As such, the feminist aims of such women differ fundamentally from their European counterparts:

the pleasure she [Third world women] seeks lies not such in asserting her own individualist sexuality or sexual freedom as found in white bourgeois culture, but in the commitment to communal survival and in creating social networks and organizations so that she and her community can be healed and flourish. (Kwok, 37).

The objectives of women in the Third world are accordingly elemental, focusing on basic needs of sustenance and survival. In this context, postcolonial feminist readings of the bible encourage interpretations that: illustrate forms of resistance and hope in varied colonial contexts; elevate the voices of women; are sensitive to postcolonial concerns such as loss of identity (Wong, 12). In addition, hermeneutics within this theology pay special attention to biblical women in the 'contact zone', which is defined as "the space of encounters where people of different geographical and historical backgrounds are brought into contact with one another" (Kwok, 82). An example of a 'contact zone' exegesis is offered by Laura Donaldson in her analysis of the prostitute Rahab in Joshua 2.

In this Old Testament story, Rahab, identified as a 'harlot' and a Canaanite, protects the spies sent by Joshua and is thus granted elevated social standing in the Jewish community to which she migrates. A literal reading of the story might fixate on the act of self-action as cause for social advancement with 'the people of God', which might then fuel a symbolic exegesis in which fortuitous circumstances are seen as doorways to 'The Heavenly Kingdom'.

In the spirit of the postcolonial interpretation, Donaldson turns the exegesis on its head and reads the story not from a Jewish viewpoint, but from that of a Canaanite. From this revised perspective she finds parallels with Rahab's exposition and the historical predicament of Native women during Westernization. Embedded in the text are many of the colonial assumptions that victimized indigenous women: the inferiority of foreign cultures and the expectation of female subservience. Exegesis through a postcolonial lens thus uncovers a 'story behind the story' – the invasion of Rahab's home and the cultural displacement to which she becomes subject (Kwok, 82). Such a counter narrative calls to attention all the colonized Rahabs throughout history and the fundamental principles of feminine equality and freedom that their memories demand.

In applying the theoretical principles of postcolonial feminist theology to the religious experiences of Anglo-Indian women, I performed an unscientific survey of seventeen females within our community. I interviewed them at length regarding their Christian

upbringings, experiences, and general thoughts on religion, and shared my research on colonialism and postcolonial theory where I felt it appropriate. My expectation was that the women in our community would be uniquely positioned to comment on postcolonial influences because of their combined 'colonizer' and 'colonized' ancestry.

The educational background of those surveyed was wide-ranging, from those with partial high school experience to those with postgraduate degrees. None of the ladies, however, received formal training in theology of any kind, which made for some interesting observations ("Sheldon, you are intellectually sentimentalizing this...").

In some respects, the feedback of Anglo-Indian women reflects the findings of contextual theologies: the 'elder' generation clearly identified with the traditional forms of patriarchy that the first and second waves of feminism sought (and still seek) to eradicate. Many of these women described, with telling detail, the patriarchal-bent of their respective homelands: how women were excluded from decision making positions and relegated to subservient 'womanly' jobs such as teaching and nursing. Interestingly, these injustices were often qualified as 'minor' when compared to the graver forms of discrimination experienced by indigenous Hindu and Muslim woman ("Sheldon, they were treated like slaves").

The survey also uncovered a notable paradox: the kyriarchical modes of oppression experienced by our community in Asia spawned a religious and communal solidarity that petered out when these forms of oppression were eliminated during Western migration. Interestingly, the repressive motherlands of Anglo-Indians spawned a communal identity defined in negative terms: the community coalesced precisely because its members did *not* speak Bengali, Hindi, or Urdu, and were *not* Jain, Hindu, or Muslim. In being displaced into Christian and English-speaking societies thereafter, the community lost its distinctive strands of 'counterculture' and dispersed accordingly. In sum, the Anglo-Indian community was birthed and shaped by the respective acts of colonization and oppression, and self-extinguished when it was no longer subjected to the morally unsavory circumstances of the Third world.

The women I interviewed did not know what to make of these facts. As most were not academics, the theological irony of our community's history struck them as uselessly abstract as opposed to interesting or thorny. However, one issue these women did grapple with was the degree to which they had unknowingly oppressed native Indian and Bengali females. For example, while one individual stipulated that she was victimized by traditional forms of patriarchy, only after some reflection did she acknowledged the kyriarchy she had exercised over her female servants.

The realization that Anglo-Indian women were themselves culprits in Western exploitation gave rise to an interesting question: were Anglo-Indian women 'better off' because of the transgressions of colonization? Furthermore, could such considerations offer any insight into the more global pursuit of women's rights?

The women I interviewed struggled with this question, but most acceded that the introduction of Western ideas into the Eastern world improved the lives of indigenous women tremendously. They sited the virtual eradication of practices such as sati, polygamy and the caste system, as proof that colonization could not be painted in purely negative terms. Instead, most echoed the sentiments of Musa W. Dube: that women in the Third world needed to favor imperial forms of oppression over indigenous, patriarchal ones, because cemented Third world conceptions required "Western lubrication" (Dube, 122). A penetrating question is when such 'lubrication' impinges on indigenous cultures and when it enlightens it.

On the question of how to draw this line, most women pointed to a central theme of John Paul II's pontificate, the Church's responsibility in defending the immeasurable dignity afforded to all humans by means of Christ's sacrifice:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer "fully reveals man to himself". If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension man finds again the greatness, *dignity and value that belong to his humanity.* (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10)

A critical component of postcolonial feminist theology is that women in the Third

world 'appropriate' colonial realities into their personal and cultural identities. Likewise, the voices of these women must appropriate the goals and designs of postcolonial feminist theology itself. The experiences of Anglo-Indian women suggest that colonial sensitivities must be balanced by Christian appeals for the dignity and decency for women throughout the globe in the sincere struggle towards an emphatically different yet plausible future of gender mutuality.

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Today, Sheldon is a Director at Infusion Development, and Chief Technical Officer of 'Infusion Angels' an angel fund and incubator that assists Canadian students in converting their ideas into full-fledged, self-sustaining companies. In addition, he continues to be closely involved with the University of Waterloo in an academic capacity as an Adjunct Lecturer at the Waterloo School of Optometry. Finally, Sheldon graduated Alpha Sigma Nu with a masters of Theological Studies degree from the University of Toronto, including thesis work connecting the disparate realms of neuroscience and ethics. He has also studied creative writing at U of T and Oxford. He can be reached at sfrenandez@infusion.com

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