Liberation Theology and Decolonization? Contemporary Perspectives for Systematic Theology

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Abstract

This article seeks to offer some thoughts on a decolonial theology. It reaffirms some of the basic methodological and epistemological aspects of liberation theology, arguing that what is understood as decolonial critique has some continuities and some discontinuities with the liberation theological discourse. A characterization of the 'decolonial turn' and a critical understanding of the regime of coloniality as counter face of modernity follows. It is argued with some authors of the field that the regime of coloniality forms a matrix of power that includes the coloniality of power, of being, and of knowledge, and that modern and colonial theology is an heir of this model for society, imposed over non-western peoples. The article ends up reflecting on how this decolonial critique can be received by systematic theology, suggesting some implications for a decolonial theology.

Keywords: Decolonial Theology, Liberation Theology, Epistemology, Methodology, Systematic Theology.

Locating Reflection

When it comes to reflecting on the role of religion, more broadly, and the contribution of systematic theology, more specifically, the notion of decoloniality is becoming crucial. Although it has a global aspect, the places that are reflecting more directly on this critical perception are located in the so

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called 'global south'. Global south is not only a geographic indication, but a political one. Authors like Saskia Sassen (2007), Boaventura de Souza Santos (2010) or even Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) would agree that even in the northern hemisphere there is global south as marginal and peripheral places, excluded socially and economically. However, the notion of decoloniality is much more concerned with the prevailing conditions created by different colonial experiences and their continuity in contemporary societies.

This article was built upon topics that help us to elaborate our argument. The first topic presents some basic tenets of liberation theology method. This has the intention to emphasize some of the aspects that lead us to consider that this method has already, to a good measure, a decolonial approach. The second topic presents more deeply some of the steps of the referred method. They are listed as the socio-analytic mediation, hermeneutic mediation, practical mediation and through it we try to show the flow of the method that begins from the contextual and existential need in praxis to the re-elaboration of theory. The third topic is more conceptual, offering some of the basic ideas of the contemporary decolonial debate, with a deeper focus in Latin American debate. It tries to make a differentiation between what is coloniality and what is decoloniality. Lastly, we try to suggest some practical results as basic or fundamental aspects that should be considered in a decolonial theology, asking how decoloniality affects theology.

The academic point of departure, in terms of scholarship, is the question of the interconnectedness between the tradition of liberation theology, very important in contexts like Brazil and South Africa during their political struggles, dictatorship and apartheid, and the struggles, including the decolonial theoretical contemporaries' framework adopted by many social movements. We have been particularly reflecting on this topic from the perspective of our own activist involvement in social movements, especially in Fees Must Fall activities (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2017a, Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2017b, Buttelli and Le Bruyns 2018). These social movements have been using the theoretical tools of a decolonial critique, understanding how democracy has not been able to change the socio-political reality because of the continuity of a 'regime of coloniality', especially identified by Fees Must Fall in South African Universities and the academic curricula (Naidoo 2016). As theologians, our particular question and our utmost aim in this article is to verify how can we grasp the methodological and systematic proximity between the liberation theology method and the contemporary decolonial debate.

Although some debate has been developed on this field (Albán 2013, Arce-Valentin 2017), we consider that a specific focus in the results for systematic theology is still needed.

It is, therefore, important to situate, to locate ourselves as we start to present a systematic reflection on the most recent debates within the liberation theology tradition, namely, the decolonial turn that has happened in the realm of social sciences and that finds place also in the theological debate.

Liberation Theology Method

Some of the historians of Christianity in Latin America, as Enrique Dussel, for instance, recognize that liberation theology has not started only in 1960's or 1970's as usually affirmed (1972). They affirm that Latin American theology has from the beginning movements of resistance against the Portuguese and Spanish colonial enterprise. Especially in what relates to the treatment given to the indigenous populations. To mention one example, we can recall the Dominican Bartolomeu de Las Casas (2011 [1542]) who arrived as missionary in Latin America by the beginning of the 16th century. He formulated the defence of the humanity and dignity of indigenous peoples in the face of the dehumanizing treatment. Based on this example and in many others, we can understand that the Latin American theological reflection was always formulated contextually. It always confronted the reality faced during a long process of colonization that ended only in the 19th century as political regime (Gibellini 1987).

However, as we know it, liberation theology was formulated around the second half of the 20th century. Michel Löwy (1996) in his work named *The War of Gods*, on religion and politics in Latin America, identifies in the 1950s already the emergence of a Christianity of liberation, mainly lived in a daily life experience of poor church communities, which later were called Base Ecclesial Communities. Differently than usually described, liberation theology was not created by theologians who formulated it systematically as many other theologies. It was, on the contrary, created and formulated according to the practice of lay Christians that gathered as community to read the bible and to experience their spirituality and faith as a source for their struggle for a better life (Mesters & Orofino 2006).

The so-called popular reading of the Bible was a simple method created to help poor people to read the Bible in a way that could make sense to their

lives. This method was named See-Judge-Act and it was initially formulated by Josef-León Cardjin, a Belgian Catholic friar. The first step *See* was an initial moment of reflection about the social conditions, the political reality, the economic characteristics of the daily life of the people. Before reading the Bible, it was necessary to look at our own life, identifying the challenges and the questions that we bring to the reading of the Bible. The second step is *Judge*. It is the hermeneutical approximation to the biblical text. How do we understand it? What does it say to its original biblical context and how can we understand in our daily reality, already understood by our collective reflection? The judge moment is the word of God said to our context. The third step is called *Act* and it is concerned with the results of our encounter with the transforming Gospel. It is the resulting practice, our political activity – in a broad sense - in the world to change our reality of suffering and to create better life.

As we see, this method is contextual. It is related to the specific reality of the community, and the theological learning in the process of reading the Bible is not neutral and universal but responds to challenges and questions of humans situated historically, socially and culturally. It is neither a church centred reflection nor a disengaged spirituality. On the contrary. It is a process of reading the Bible situated in the daily life, in the workplace, by the youth at the universities, at unions, at workers organizations and so on. It is public theology in a sense that it reflects in the public space about the ordinary things of life. In this sense it leads to a citizen and responsible participation in the world.

Socio-analytic Mediation, Hermeneutic Mediation, Practical Mediation

Clodovis Boff, (2009) a Brazilian theologian who had experienced living six months with poor people in Amazon forest and six months at the university lecturing and formulating that experience in academic terms developed the *See*, *Judge* and *Act* terms in more refined ways. The first step was recognized as a socio-analytic mediation. It means that to understand reality, theological reflection should make use of the discoveries of other disciplines, like sociology, anthropology, psychology and so on. These sciences can help us to look at our social, political, cultural and economic reality and to understand it in a deeper way. Theology, then, works in partnership with other knowledges (Boff 2009).

After diagnosing and suggesting a general overview of what happens in society, the judging moment is described by Boff as a hermeneutic mediation (2009: 67ff). In this approach to the Bible, philosophy can give a substantial contribution in helping to establish what kind of hermeneutical approach we find more suitable to understand the Scriptures. There is no direct and objective way to understand the message of God that is not mediated by our interpretative attitude. Even fundamentalism is a type of hermeneutics, as it decides to approach the Scriptures with some assumptions pre-established and with a specific attitude. Methods of interpretation and a dedicated study of the Bible constitute this methodological step. It may use different exegetical tools to understand what the intention of the author and the meaning of that message to the original readers or listeners were. After that, the theological meaning of the biblical text comes closer to our very reality. The hermeneutical mediation helps to find out what would be the word of God for the contingences of the real life today.

The third step related with the action reflects on the dynamic and dialectical experience on the tension between theory and practice (Boff 2009: 159ff). This is in fact one of the major contributions of the theological epistemology of liberation theology, which finds as epistemological locus the social locus, the place for political praxis. The so called *practical mediation* reflects, in a new paradigm, the relation between theology and politics. Liberation theologians formulated this method more systematically and reflected more deeply on its epistemological meaning. One aspect recognized was that it promotes an epistemological turn. Epistemology comes from Greek: 'episteme' means knowledge. So that epistemology is the science, the systematic reflection about knowledge, how it is constructed, how it is developed. To affirm, then, that liberation theology made an epistemological turn means that it changed the way theology was epistemologically conceived. And this is, namely, a change from a deductive approach to an inductive approach (Scannone 1986).

According to the *see, judge and act* method of liberation theology, the subject of the theological knowledge has changed. It is not (only) the academic theologian, nor the hierarchy of the church, but the poor people living in the real constraints of different realms of society. The *poor* became a category in the methodological process. It was the poor who should now reflect and find out solutions, based on their own collective reading of the Bible, to the real problems they were facing in social reality (Bingemer 2016). The message of

God, transmitted through the scriptures, does not come deductively from up to the bottom, but it was discovered collectively by those in the bottom and could now be formulated theologically as a second act (Segundo 1976). Theology as an academic discipline is always second act. It results inductively from the living encounter of ordinary people with God, through the collective reading of the Bible. It means that at the beginning of the theological process resides an engaged spirituality.

This way to understand theology can empower several structural changes in the church and in the theological tradition. Examples of that are Leonardo Boff and Juan Luís Segundo. The former wrote a book called *Ecclesiogenesis* (1986), which reflected about this new vision and the way it affects the church structure itself. The church, when understood as the people of God that gathers in small communities and read the Bible together in an engaged spirituality differs a lot from a perception of church as merely its clergy. Boff asserted the understanding that the church of Christ is a church of the poor and for that reason it can be found from the bottom upwards to the top of the hierarchy. That was obviously not well accepted by the hierarchy of the church at that time and Leonardo Boff was reprimanded by the Vatican to withdraw from his positions. By not accepting he was condemned by the prefect of the congregation of the doctrine of faith, cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, to remain in silence as a representative of the ministry of the church.

Juan Luís Segundo, by his turn, wrote a book called *Liberation of Theology* (1976). In this book, he saw liberation theology as a full hermeneutical circle. It started in certain places of reality, reflected on God's word for that reality and finished by the political action to change society. At this final moment, theological reflection returns to its beginning. The circle never ends and every time, the reflection ends up changing theology itself. Liberation theology does not incur in dogmatisms by its own methodology, as it is always reforming its postulates. Liberation theology, then, liberates theology from becoming static and fossilized reflection or a crystalized body of knowledge that does not correspond with the questions and challenges of a certain context.

In order to synthetize the new methodological and epistemological approach adopted by Liberation Theology, especially in what concerns the academic task of theology, we could understand with Patty Lather how this view can be understood within the contemporary scientific frameworks. By recognizing that 'Since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, we

should feel free to substitute explicit interests for implicit ones' (Lather 1986: 63 quoting Reinhartz 1985), she touches one of the most usual debates on scientific method and its meaning for academic theology. She states that,

> scientific 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' serve to mystify the inherently ideological nature of research in the human sciences and to legitimate privilege based on class, race and gender. Within this frame of reference, research which is openly value based is neither more nor less ideological than is mainstream positivist research (Lather 1986: 64).

By recognizing that ideology is always present in academic research, it becomes a starting point for theological reflection that instead of hiding the subject it is necessary to reflect critically on our previous affiliations and philosophical preferences, in order to use methods to check and validate our debate, trying to avoid having our ideological presuppositions unwittingly affecting the results of our theological research. Therefore, we will expose shortly some features and steps of our own theological trajectories, in order to give an example on how we can map our research itinerary situating ourselves and the heritage we bring with us.

Some worries are part of this approach and we try to direct our reflection to respond to these personal theological preoccupations. Initially, as Brazilian and South African theologians, we work within the framework or paradigm of liberation theologies. In plural, as they ended up becoming diversified as theology recognized the plurality of the subjects (Bingemer 2016). The guiding question that leads us is how theology could have a significant contribution in the public space, especially considering the young democracies in societies like Brazil and South Africa. For this reason, we consider the impact of contemporary theologies in the public space. How did theology contribute to the reconstruction of nations like Brazil and South Africa, especially after military dictatorship and apartheid respectively, and how it could be helpful to promote a culture of human rights and to overcome inequality and poverty (Buttelli 2012; Buttelli; Le Bruyns & Sinner 2014; Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2017; Le Bruyns & Ulshöfer 2008; Le Bruyns 2015).

By realizing the continuity of some of the most unequal mechanisms to redistribute wealth, even more than 20 or 30 years after the reestablishment of democracies in Brazil and South Africa, we were able to notice that poor

people were still in need of theologies that helped them to address the serious social and economic circumstances. By reflecting on the role of the emerging Public Theology, we were able to notice that liberation theologies are still very critical in order to denounce the unwillingness and the impossibility to change structurally society in order to include the poor and to reduce abject poverty and the scandal of inequality. Theology should still be a reflexive activity by the people that struggles to get emancipated from different forms of exclusion and marginalization. A powerful image and example for us was the South African Kairos Document, written in 1986. The Kairos Document that influenced many other Kairos documents throughout the world understood that God expresses Godself in specific times, in moments of truth, taking sides, announcing grace for those persecuted and judgement for those who contribute for inequity, injustice, racism and dehumanization of others (Le Bruyns 2015). Besides denouncing State Theology – it means theology that was at the service of justification of apartheid the regime – and a Church Theology – it means – a pretendedly neutral reflection merely concerned with internal affairs, the Kairos Document proposed a prophetic theology that takes sides in historical struggles. So it was against the apartheid regime. We are again in times of crisis. It is again or still a Kairos moment for God to take sides in history and society, expressing solidarity for those marginalized and persecuted as much as criticizing the existing systems and structures that make impossible for these young democracies to offer a change for those more desperately in need (Buttelli 2012). Using Allan Boesak's words, it is again time for theology to engage in a 'rhetoric of barricade' (Boesak 2015), occupying the public space, struggling for those marginalized in several ways: Women, Workers, Black peoples, indigenous peoples, LGBTQIA+ people, migrants, and many other forms of exclusion. In that sense, a decolonial critique and political engagement for theological reflection is urgent.

What is Coloniality/ Decoloniality?

After presenting shortly some of the main features of the methodology and epistemology formulated by Liberation Theology, it is important now to understand that the contemporary debate on decolonial theology is closely connected with this theoretical development. This is already referred to by Dussel (2013), one of the most important references to the contemporary decolonial debate. This connection has been formulated lately (Albán 2013;

Buttelli 2014; Tamayo 2017; Arce-Valentín 2017; Mella 2016; Cunha 2018) and it emphasizes some continuities as much as some disruptive suggestions that may result from the contemporary decolonial debate. As we move on in our argument, having this open ideological assumption and having in mind the intention to address critically the engine of the process of construction of inequalities, we would like to suggest that, in societies like Brazil and South Africa, one aspect becomes central to understand the dynamics related to the political and economic realities. These societies are profoundly marked by the colonial experience.

The decolonial critique is a category that enables us to understand the way capitalism and modernity established themselves as a single process and how it built up this global system that ends up resulting in the violent exploitation of the southern countries. This process entrenches inequalities enriching rich countries and creating an unbalanced political access to power. Sampie Terreblanche, South African historian, emphasizes this exploitative and dependence relation between the West and the rest of the world:

> It should be taken into account that the spectacular development of the Western world vis-à-vis the pathetic underdevelopment of the Restern world over a period of 500 years could not have taken place without the West preying parasitically and relentlessly on the people and the resources of the Restern world (Terreblanche 2014: 8).

As we start to reflect about the notion of coloniality, it is important to see it as different than the concept of colonialism. For Restrepo and Rojas, colonialism is a regime that establishes several processes, institutions and strategies that enable politic and military domination. These institutions serve to structure and to assure the exploitation of work and wealth of the colonies, always benefiting the colonizers (2012). Coloniality, however, is a pattern of power that continues and recreates itself continuously through the creation of hierarchies that, even after the end of the political regimes of colonialism, continue to distinguish people according to class, race and gender (Quijano 2010). Restrepo and Rojas affirm that the pattern of power maintained in the coloniality regime ensures the exploitation of some human beings, peoples and States over others. It might happen through capital and, therefore, economic domination, but most of all it becomes a symbolic process that subalternates and obliterates knowledges, experiences and ways of living.

The second important distinction is between decolonial thinking and post-colonial thinking. Alejandro de Oto (2017) helps us to understand that post-colonial thought emerged in the context of discourse analysis, especially by authors like Edward Saïd, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. This last one giving a special emphasis on the subaltern studies, analyzing the power dynamic between discourse of the colonizers, the use of their language and the impact it has on the discourse of the colonized. These field of studies was basically very heterogeneous, being influenced by several critical theories, quite different from each other as Marxism or Psychoanalysis, for instance.

The so called decolonial turn, as Ballestrin (2013) calls it, identifies, in a slightly different way, establishes that the different colonialisms in the Americas produced a whole matrix of power (Mignolo 2010; Restrepo & Rojas 2012; Quijano 2010). It has a long-term influence and is built as a structure that supports a regime of coloniality. Coloniality is not only the political or military regime. It goes much deeper, creating a subjectivity based on the differentiation according to sex, race and class. It permeates social and historical forms throughout the development of modernity and its imposition on non-western peoples. The decolonial turn focuses on the uncoupling from these matrix of power, based on the triple subjugation according to sex, race and class, and its philosophical and epistemological consequences.

Felipe Tonial (2018) also offers two helpful distinctions to differentiate decolonial turn from post-colonial thinking. The first distinction refers to time and geography. As the former refers to the colonization of the Americas and, in a dialectic process, to the establishment of modernity between the 16th and 17th century, the latest – post-colonialism – refers to more recent colonial processes, mostly experienced between the 19th and 20th centuries generally in Africa and Asia. The second interesting contribution of Tonial, also based on the distinction suggested by Walsh (2013) refers to the dynamic of the decolonial turn. For the author, it includes two dimensions: the first one requires to 'uncolonize', meaning the process of detaching from a certain kind of knowledge produced by coloniality. The second dimension requires to 'decolonize', conceived as a more creative process of suggesting something different, something outside the limits of the framework of coloniality.

The decolonial critique denounces the way capitalism and modernity created a profound matrix of power that hinders the flourishment of non-Western peoples, as identified by Walter Rodney regarding the African

Continent (Rodney 1972). The colonial system can be understood as the same thing with modernity and capitalism. They are intricately related. It is not possible to understand modernity as something that concerns specifically European history, as in the process of its constitution, it required the colonial *conquista*, the conquer, the subjugation of these other peoples and the economic exploitation by means of violence of the non-western peoples and territories (Dussel 1993; Tonial 2018). According to Grosfoguel, the decolonial turn helps us to change the way we understand knowledge. He argues that,

> from the structural location of an indigenous woman in the Americas what arrived was a more complex world-system than what political economy paradigms and world-system analysis portray. A European/ capitalist/ military/ christian/ patriarchal/ white/ heterosexual/ male arrived in the Americas and established simultaneously in time and space several entangled global hierarchies (Grosfoguel 2013: 70).

Way beyond a simple human encounter, what happened during the colonial time was the establishment of a real colonial matrix of power that reaches profoundly various dimensions of life. A first type of dynamic imposed, according to Maldonado (2007), was described as a *coloniality of being*: It imposed an entire way of living on the colonized, criminalizing the cultural and traditional ways of being of non-Western peoples. It imposed Christianity and the persecution of other religiosities and traditional beliefs. The colonial/modern notion of human being – described by René Descartes as a being of knowledge – is not ascribed to the whole humanity, but to the white, European, Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal, bourgeois and rational man. The idealized notion of humanity that became the measure of the right and desirable way to be. Non-European indigenous populations, black, women, non-heterosexual, non-Christian, non-rational (at least in the way modernity understood what is rationality), non-patriarchal, and non-capitalists are regarded as less (non) human beings. The colonial project was meant to save this 'lost humanity', these uncivilized and underdeveloped peoples and to bring them, dualistically, from the dark to the light (Grosfoguel 2013). The coloniality of being, although based on an idealistic ethereal notion of humanity, was imposed on the bodies of the considered deviant peoples through violence, sexual abuse, domination and enslavement (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018).

The second type of coloniality imposed during the colonial period was the *coloniality of power* (Quijano 2010). Colonialism became a political project and was imposed violently, through military *conquista* (Dussel 1993; Tonial 2018), genocides and slavery building a global system of political exploitation. The establishment of colonies ruled by Western empires obliterated different ways of living and of social organization, imposing a racist, white supremacist, aristocratic and oligarchic system of domination. Capitalism was never an option adopted rationally by the colonized nations, but a violent imposition through inhuman racism and slavery, which was justified by the modern sciences and by religious and philosophical systems (Meland 2015; Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018).

The political project of modernity and coloniality regime are also inherently related with the construction of a global economic system. Capitalism is not a system of freedom, as the liberal ideology affirms. However, this false notion of freedom in political liberalism only applied formally to white and European men. Liberal notion of right did not apply for those colonized. They had bodies, land, resources, and work expropriated, exploited and dominated by the Western imperial powers. As Barbara Bush showed clearly, the colonial exploitation has shifted and changed, but never finished.

> Orthodox historians argued that imperialism ended with decolonization but, for Third World nationalists and radical Western intellectuals, 'informal' imperial power relations were perpetuated by economic exploitation and political domination. World system theories see capitalism rather than imperialism as the crucial dynamic in globalization and deepening inequalities [in the second half of the twentieth century] (Bush 2006: 46).

A third type of coloniality, as a product of the colonial enterprise, is called *coloniality of knowledge* (Mignolo 2000; Lander 2005) and of theological knowledge too. The whole matrix of power could never be completely imposed and accepted (which was never without permanent contestation and resistance) without the imposition of a specific way to understand the way we know something. This epistemological colonization imposed a system of knowledge: the paradigm of the modern science. The modern science established discursively the only method that recognizes what can be considered truth. This

parameter of truth was projected on all the dimensions of life, ruling over what can be accepted as legitimate or not. As Europeans developed and mastered this methodological tool, things they discovered and established as accepted truths are the only things that can be accepted. The coloniality of knowledge (Walsh 2012) deconstructed completely other knowledges, erased ancient knowledges – transmitted orally through generations in other cultural patterns – stole the practical knowledge created by other peoples and established an Eurocentric narrative, an Eurocentric 'beginning of the history', forgetting other knowledges and establishing a new cornerstone, a new centre for the authority of the discourse, creating ways to impose it, substituting other epistemological systems and subjugating other forms of discourses (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018).

How Decoloniality Affects Theology

Theological reflection was certainly captive to this process of imposition of a colonial epistemology. More than that, it was also instrumental for the establishment of a regime of coloniality. Nevertheless, we can find theological sources in Christian tradition to deconstruct this main colonial Christian narrative, as Bartolomeu de Las Casas, already referred, among others in Latin America and in Africa. We tried to verify to some extent how the basic tenets of liberation theology already indicated a type of critique that led to the contemporary decolonial debates. Therefore, we see the interconnectedness and a certain continuity between liberation theology and its method (socio-analytic mediation; hermeneutic mediation and practical mediation) and the most recent developments of the decolonial debate. It is also possible to affirm that liberation theology continues its production in a very similar line with the decolonial discourse, as we could notice comparing some recent works (Gutierrez & Müller 2015; Mbembe 2016).

The main body of academic theology, as a modern knowledge, operates under the modern science paradigm. Therefore, it is unable to dialogue with other knowledges situated outside the modern scientific paradigm. Modern theological reflection has its centre of authority of knowledge production in the West. Therefore, a decolonial critique is crucial to understand the role of theology in the contemporary crisis of capitalism and the coloniality regime that still operates (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018).

Liberation Theology is to a certain extent recognized as a decolonial

theological critique although some of its basic assumptions and the way it was formulated still operates under the modern paradigm. A decolonial critique must make a step forward and allow itself to become a theology that grows from another epistemological perspective (Albán 2013). One good suggestion on how a decolonial process could affect the constitution of academic curricula in an African context is presented by Mngomezulu and Hadebe (2018). He shows that to decolonize in African context means also to Africanize the curricula, and that this process is already being persecuted since the liberation of many African countries in East Africa, but that the decolonization agenda helps to bring it to a new phase.

After presenting an 'uncolonizing' critique, that deconstructs effects of the coloniality regime, it is important, recalling Walsh and Tonial, to decolonize theology as a creative initiative. An important notion on this building process is the idea of interculturality. Interculturality is being suggested as a pattern of thinking that gives voice to the forgotten – and still resisting – sources of knowledge, as the indigenous cultures, traditions, ways of social organization, belief systems and practices (Walsh 2007). The intercultural approach to a decolonial theology allows the theological reflection to suggest a 'border thinking', to use Walsh expression (Walsh 2004). Raúl Fornet-Betancourt offers other major critical contributions to Christianity in Latin America, suggesting interculturality as a decolonial theological reflection. For him, interculturality suggests a pluralistic balance. It does not dismiss or neglect any contribution from different religious traditions or beliefs. Interculturality proposes the communion of these different views. Such new kinds of interaction – overcoming the pattern suggested by coloniality regime – avoid doctrinaire conversions according to an old paradigm of mission. It is a dialogical experimentation that does not reduce the other as object (Fornet-Betancourt 2007; Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018). In terms of methodological debate, he suggests that interculturality allows us to develop a method that,

> opens for plural and equivalent ways of doing theology. In a way, it is the methodology that is already glimpsed, although more implicitly than explicitly, in the contributions of Indian, African-American and religious pluralism theologies; but that must still be elaborated as a methodology that consciously assumes that the so called 'theological places', be these religious traditions, cultures or historical-social places, such as 'the poor' or 'the woman' are themselves methods that

> lead the pilgrimage of humanity by the footprints of God in history. It would be elaborated in this way as a complex methodology of methods or, if preferred, as an interaction of diverse methods by means of which they interfere, intersect, contrast and eventually recognize confluences or convergences (Fornet-Betancourt 2010:54; Our translation).

A decolonial theology recognizes that the modernity and the colonial project brought a particular understanding of the Christian faith, the Western. One of its basic features is that this Christian-colonial project sees itself as an universal narrative that was imposed and had to be accepted by the majority of the peoples in the world (Dussel 1993). The interculturality allows us to see how Christian faith can be experienced and formulated by and in different realities. This gives different faces to Christian faith. A decolonial theology operates on the deconstruction of the theological legitimation of the colonial matrix of power and, in an intercultural approach, suggests heuristically new ways to understand God and God's Kingdom, learning from different cultural systems (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018). This also means that an intercultural – decolonized – theology offers another experience of the gospel, another framework of interpretation, another message from Christian faith. Christ is received and experienced differently in the South African townships than he is in the corridors of academic theological learning in Europe and United States. The testimony that Christians give from their experiences change what Christ is and what the Christian experience in the living reality is. In Latin America, as much as in Africa, the gospel is received in bodies which are profoundly affected by violence: sexual violence, racist violence, culturally colonized, death bodies because of homo and transphobia, black youth and lives which are ripped by a racist violent colonial power. An intercultural theology narrates the story of the death and the resurrection of Christ not from an ethereal and neutral modern scientific point of view, but from the reality of wounded and bleeding bodies. Christ becomes a black child running from the police, a gay boy, raped for the sake of 'correction', Christ is a woman who suffers daily aggression from her partner, Christ is an old person, abandoned by the state, by the family, starving in the streets. The cry of these poor people is the content of a decolonial and intercultural theology. Not the only voice of God, but certainly a deep and strong appearance of God in reality.

To finalize our discussion, we would like to list some of the possible aspects that should be considered to give a step towards a decolonial

theological thinking. It obviously does not exclude other categories that might be needed to promote, in other contexts, a type of reflection that foresees routes to escape the insidious imposition of modernity and capitalism as a regime of contemporary coloniality. These categories can be enhanced by the observation of different contextual circumstances that demand us to understand other forms of exclusion, marginalization and dehumanization.

The first aspect is that a decolonial procedure should encourage new subjects to become agents on the reflexive process, as LGBTQIA+, black people, indigenous, ethnic minorities and so on. Franz Fanon helped us to differentiate between the being and nonbeing zones as territories of those dehumanized by the colonial process (Fanon 1967). Decolonial theology is *theology through the nonbeing zone* understood in a multiple way, as coloniality is imposed by multiple exclusions and marginalization, also in the constitution of theological discourse. We can, from our own experience of engagement with students struggling for free and decolonized education, say that those are the agents and actors of a decolonial theology. Instead of writing articles and books from cosy offices and comfortable chairs on *decolonizing theology*, the real decolonization of systematic theology happens when we are able to speak from the experience of God living the vulnerability of those students being harassed, shot dead and dismissed by the colonial powers, perpetuated by the corporate universities.

A second aspect that should be considered as crucial for a decolonial theology understands that it should be *anti-patriarchal*. Many authors have shown the intrinsic relationship between patriarchalism and coloniality (Lugones 2014; Zibechi 2015; Tonial 2018). Gender and cis/heteronormativity were principles that regulate the establishment of the colonial matrix of power and therefore, in order to transit to other place, outside the limits of this patriarchal and heteronormative pattern of power in the formulation of theological discourse, we should learn and formulate a decolonial theology from these experiences. A good example of such a decolonial praxis happened in Brazil during the 19th Gay Parade in São Paulo in 2015, where Christ crucified was a transsexual woman. That was very provocative and polemic and interpreted by evangelical fundamentalists as blasphemy. These critical discourses are not able to decolonize the main visions reproduced about who Jesus might have been. To decolonize theology from an anti-patriarchal perspective should include to establish an inclusive narrative about God and God's revelation.

A third aspect considers thinking theologically from the perspective of the youth. The decolonial pattern of power created, especially in more vulnerable context as the colonized countries, the state promotes a cleansing of the youth, with a special emphasis on the black and mestizo youth. The youth is organized and struggling to achieve different political objectives, as the South African Fees Must Fall movement shows. Important in this regard is to consider young people not only as 'the future', but voices of the present, engaged and active agents constituting discursiveness from their own experiencing of reality. The youth is able to bring new and courageous insight to transform the societies that are paralysed because of the status quo, who wants to maintain itself whatever it costs. Young people bring powerful potentials inherent to their own existential experience. That is why the youth is always dismissed and disregarded in political and economic decisions. Nonetheless, we have been witness of the protagonist action of the youth in central political struggles nowadays, as Fees Must Fall and 'secondarists' occupy movement in Brazil, especially in the 2016 experience. They are theological interpreters who read the word and formulate their own spirituality from these existential experiences. A decolonial theology would find space to rethink systematically from this point of view, what could be very heuristic for systematic theology.

The fourth aspect is to create ways to reflect theology collectively instead of reducing theology to an individualistic endeavour. Modernity created dynamics or radical individualism for many aspects of life and the scientific activity is also seen as something done solely by an individual. A collective activity allows us to build on the intersubjectivity and the inclusiveness of the other in the process of theologizing. Together with it, aspects of complementarity should be considered. Instead of a constant process of synthesis, an intercultural and decolonial theology should leave space for a type of complementary and non-exclusive thinking. Diversity enriches theological reflection. The spirituality of the primitive communities of Christian tradition was a collective one. Jesus recognized the centrality of the collective in experiencing the faith, saying: 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them' (Mt 18.20 – New International Version - NIV). In the same direction, the Holy Spirit was not sent individually, but to a group of people gathered and trying to find out what would be their task in the world (Acts 2). These are only biblical examples that point to the centrality of the collective identity of the theological experience, that emerges from the encoun-

ter with God. This articulates the difference between people united. This can be seen nowadays as a tremendous decolonial experience that should inspire a decolonial systematic theology that challenges the egocentric, isolated, individualistic type of thinking, characteristic of contemporary regimes of coloniality.

A fifth aspect is to overcome a logocentric and rationalistic approach to knowledge and theology. The word is one way to express, to communicate and to understand. Language is much richer and offers other ways to express that give space to other dimensions of existence, such as the body, the feelings, the different artistic expressions and so on. For example, a more holistic and integral view of life is expressed by the Amerindian perspective that has as centre what is usually described as a *buen vivir* (good living). It is mostly understood as an integral way to understand life that interrelates different peoples and the nature, as much as the material and the spiritual spheres of life. For this type of thinking, which goes beyond merely thinking with the mind, there is a symbol, called *la Chacana*. The Andean cross, as some call it, has eight tips, four main vectors establishing ways of relationship, horizontal and vertical. It also offers a round empty centre that allows the communication between spiritual world and material world. All of that gathered in one integrative symbol (Estermann 2007). This rich symbol is an example of interculturality and how it might enhance theological knowledge. As an indigenous symbol, used to regulate the basic details of daily life as indicating time for sowing or reaping as much as the movement of the sun through the year, it also indicates a sense of wholeness between the material aspects of life, the sense of relationship between all beings – human or not. All of that is permeated by a deep spirituality. All these aspects are bound in this religious symbol that was suggested by the indigenous people (Chechua and Aymara) as something that could elucidate the understanding of the Christian cross.

A sixth aspect to be emphasized is the interrelatedness and the crosscutting dimension of all these previous elements. Decolonial theology can only be an *intersectional theology*, that embraces and voices many forms of simultaneous exclusions. If the colonial regime is built upon a complex matrix of multiple hierarchies, the process of decolonizing theological reflection must be aware of that and be organized in an inclusive and intersectional critique. It is not the same thing to be a white or a black woman. Two existential realities are interplayed in the power relations. It is also not the same thing to be a black woman in Europe or in Africa, poor or rich, Christian or Muslim, etc. That

means that it is not enough to do systematic theology from a feminist perspective, losing the importance of the racial experience, in given cultural and social context. All the dimensions say something from the existential and material existence of the agents of the theological discourse. This is why systematic decolonial theology must be intersectional.

Last aspect, not less fundamental, should be described as an anti-capitalist approach to theology. We have sufficient evidence that capitalism is an evil system that only entrenches inequality and perpetuates injustices and all the sorts of violence and exploitation. Of humanity and of the whole planet. It is maybe time for us to think in terms of a new apocalyptic theology that prophetically denounces the evil face of capitalism and creatively and symbolically suggests other possible worlds, more just and equal (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2018). Capitalism has a profound systemic dimension. It lies under and over the construction of the ideological pillars of the contemporary world. It is so insidious that it is intricated with the constitution of modern subjectivities and the (neo)colonial experience is constructed on this ideological *Weltanschauung*. The colonial matrix is intertwined with capitalism in such a way that capitalism is racist, homo and transphobic, Western-centric, white, male and patriarchal and so on. If a decolonial systematic theology does not include capitalism as a fundamental material aspect, it certainly becomes too spiritualized, too ethereal or idealistic in its own critical approach.

Conclusion

This article tried to offer an analytical approach from liberation theology to the contemporary decolonial discourse. Its main objective was to find landmarks to think on the contribution of the decolonial discourse to a systematic theology that finds itself under the liberation theology paradigm and umbrella, pointing to some continuities and some new unfolding that could enhance our theological endeavour. One of the basic assumptions is related with the contextual and the existential centrality of the experience of the new subjects of the theological discourse. The main aspects emphasized as stalwarts of a decolonial theology were described as being anti-capitalist, intersectional, collective, non-logocentric, young, anti-patriarchal and based on protagonist engagement of multiple agents black, indigenous, etc. We end up arguing that only such approach, coming from the living reality of the bodily experience of those agents will have a transformational effect in the contemporary society.

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