

Introduction

Precarious Knowledge Practical Theology in the Context of Postcolonial Theories

Knowledge is always precarious. On the one hand, it is precarious because, within the constraints of human cognitive capacity, it is a borderline phenomenon: we are deprived of the ultimate interconnections, of cognisance of the future, knowledge is only ever possible from a certain perspective. Whoever knows something is, in the end, more likely to know what he or she does not know. In this regard, knowledge always structurally entails the experience of the crisis of this very knowledge. Scientific practices, insofar as they are aimed at the acquisition of knowledge and not only at the reproduction of what has always been known in certain contexts, are aware of the precarious character of knowledge. In this sense, this *Festschrift* can be interpreted as work on the borderline. Numerous colleagues celebrate the jubilarian's achievements with their attempts to think in new and different ways. In the process, many a small work of art has been created, works which can also be read with pleasure from a literary point of view. May all the texts, whatever their character, delight the jubilarian!

The collection of contributions bears the title *Precarious Knowledge* not only in the sense of displaying a general epistemological problem. Its subheading *Practical Theology in the Context of Postcolonial Theories* points to a further reason why knowledge is always precarious. Because the question of knowledge implies the question of how knowledge is organised and thereby of legitimisation, sanctioning, prioritisation – in short: of sweeping mechanisms and power relations. This calls for a self-reflexive and self-critical change in the consideration of our own scientific practices; possibly a precarious undertaking in itself! In this respect, the current collection may, prospectively, also develop into a productive impulse: in this volume's attempt – a volume put together primarily from the dimension of Practical Theology – to embrace and take up challenges

of postcolonial theories, many authors have embarked on a journey which ultimately leads to an uncomfortable hermeneutical position, since they have to question that which is often taken for granted: commodities and privileges in the academic context, more precisely German practical theological discourse. If this volume has turned out to be a realisation on the part of German speaking Practical Theology of its desire to enter into a discourse context which it has, to a great extent, (too) long ignored, then this would, in our view, be a significant gain for Practical Theology as a scientific discipline.

The pressing questions that postcolonial thinking raises for practical theological research on religion are too far-reaching to be answered in an *ad hoc* manner. It is all the more astonishing, therefore, that the examination of theories of postcolonialism in the contexts of German speaking Practical Theology is still largely in its infancy. The state of development of corresponding debates must itself be described as precarious. The incorporation of postcolonial theorems, the contouring of new subject areas and research questions directed by these postcolonial theorems, the critical reappraisal of the discipline's history or the querying of leading basic concepts, established methods, practised writing strategies and solidified forms of the organisation of knowledge are, at times, markedly more advanced in neighbouring disciplines, other areas of theology, and, more especially, in Practical Theology from different contexts, as the individual contributions in this volume show.

It is to the jubilarian's credit that, through her own commitment to the networking of discourse contexts, she has, also in the international context, repeatedly brought to the fore the concerns of postcolonial approaches for Practical Theology in this country. That this happened not simply in the form of a hasty programme but rather took shape in the mode of progressive reflection, be it in the various lively interdisciplinary contexts at Tübingen, in the conception of conferences or the publication of texts fundamentally relevant to Practical Theology, seems to us not only to be an engaging facet of the understanding of Birgit Weyel's academic work, but also to be entirely appropriate for the complex potential of postcolonial discourses to stimulate.

The discourses around postcolonialism are diverse. They depend on the respective situation of the participants, on the inclusions and exclusions of the discourse, on specific subject histories and fields of research, and also on the goals which those involved pursue with their reflections on postcoloniality or their postcolonially informed work. This is reflected in the way the contributions in this publication have been compiled: the authors have addressed different topics from different perspectives, drawing on different theories. The publication is therefore not – and, given its genre, cannot be, – a manifesto of Practical Theological efforts in the examination of processes of colonisation

and »ongoing decolonisation and recolonisation«¹. It is an attempt by agents in a particular scientific discourse to bring the anti-imperial critical intervention insinuated by postcolonial theories into their thinking and into the critique of their own scientific practices. In the process, the type of appropriation, the critique of their own scientific practice has various outcomes.

The limitations of this volume are obvious: the majority of the contributors are *white*, established, privileged people who are trying to trace a discourse deficit of their own *white*, established, privileged, academically hierarchical »community«. In this way, the volume, in its layout, already undermines the claim of postcolonial theories to pluralistic participatory scientific practices which aim precisely to decentre privileged positions and perspectives – for reasons of justice as well as for epistemic reasons. For the »comfortable« and conventionalised hermeneutic assumption of the ability to access the entirety of an interpretation of the world from a Eurocentric perspective reveals itself, when properly considered, to be a deficit. Within the constraints of a culturally perpetuating *colonial condition*, marginalisation and exclusions of »other« perspectives and positions are the consequence, and with them epistemic self-exclusions which produce widespread nescience. Charles W. Mills termed the problem of the deformation of a white epistemology which is unable to criticise the conditions of its deficient theory creation – and thus deficient knowledge generation – »white ignorance«.² Mills' assessment, primarily applied to the discipline of philosophy in its Eurocentric formations, may still be valid today, also with regard to (Practical) Theology: »[T]he analysis of the implications for social cognition of the legacy of white supremacy has barely been initiated.«³ Mills frames it positively: »[M]apping an epistemology of ignorance is for me a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge.«⁴ This could also be a good starting point for contemporary Practical Theology in conversation with postcolonial theories about its own scientific practices, and, if this volume were a starting point for that, more would be gained than had been hoped for. However, reference can now also somewhat cheekily be made back to Miranda Fricker and we can say: once we are aware of the inadequacies of our own epistemic behaviour, then there can be no going back to a »happyland« (Tupoka Ogette) of academic knowledge production which knows nothing of the need for

¹ Maria do Mar Castro Varela/Nikita Dhawan (Hrsg.), *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Bielefeld ³2020, 20.

² Charles W. Mills, *Weißes Nichtwissen*, in: Kristina Lepold/Marina Martinez Mateo (Hrsg.), *Critical Philosophy of Race. Ein Reader*, Berlin 2021, 180–216.

³ Charles W. Mills, *White Ignorance*, in: Shannon Sullivan/Nancy Tuana (Hrsg.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, New York 2007, 13–38, 15.

⁴ Mills, *White Ignorance* (s. Anm. 3), 16.

critical intervention.⁵ It is time that Practical Theology, as an intellectual endeavour, also reflects on the implications which postcolonialism brings as a »performative mode of critical revisionism, consistently directed at the colonial past and assessing its legacies for the present, but also focusing on those forms of colonialism that have surfaced more recently in the context of an increasingly globalized but incompletely decolonized world«⁶. This once again makes it clear that the prominent mention of the term *postcolonial* in the title of the publication is not meant to insinuate that we are in a subsequent phase in which colonialism no longer exists. Postcolonial theories are concerned with investigating the processes of colonisation, decolonisation and recolonisation. This also means that the perspective on (neo-)colonialism is not limited to the violent military occupation and exploitation of geographical territories,⁷ but also focuses on the problem of the conditions for the constitution of knowledge in the complex, historically conditioned and interwoven contexts for relations of power, domination and violence.

For Practical Theology, this results in numerous conceivable dimensions from which to deal with the topic. To name just a few: Where can traces and effects of colonialism be found in our own religious and church history? In what way is the past – and that always entails injustice, guilt and failure as well – dealt with? How can postcolonial and decolonising, but also re-colonising, practices be identified in the context of present religion and church? What critical analyses of church practice and symbols of faith passed on through Christian religion are necessary in order to expose cultural stereotypes, latent hegemonial ideas, etc.? To what extent can receptions of superiority constructs in religious history and the corresponding, continuing effects in the present be identified by means of critical analyses of our own subject history? Where, with regard to the methodology of our own subject, do colonial structures nest in the approaches and basic theoretical concepts of concrete research work? The list could go on. Many of the current contributions have been inspired by these or similar kinds of questions, as an explicit examination of the problem formulations, concepts and concerns of postcolonial theories, as a stimulus to initiate small empirical case studies for this specific purpose, as part of the search for relevant implications of our own research work, and partly also as a reflection on topics whose connections to the discussion of colonisation, decolonisation and recolonisation tend to remain implicit.

⁵ Cf. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemische Ungerechtigkeit. Macht und die Ethik des Wissens*, München 2023, 143 f.

⁶ Graham Huggan, General Introduction, in: Graham Huggan (Hrsg.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, Oxford/UK 2013, 10.

⁷ Cf. Castro Varela/Dhawan (Hrsg.), *Postkoloniale Theorie* (s. Anm. 1), 20.

The 24 contributions to this *Festschrift* cover all areas of practical theological research and also take up interdisciplinary perspectives; indeed, in a volume in honour of Birgit Weyel, there could be no other way. In view of the multi-layered nature of the respective considerations, we have opted for a restrained structuring which groups the assembled texts loosely and rather unambitiously in programmatic terms. The first section contains contributions which deal primarily with questions of analytically guided theory formation. A second group of texts deals with the problems from a historical perspective. Finally, the third section contains contributions which primarily approach current phenomena empirically in one way or another. Division into the different sections follows perceived weightings in the texts; in many cases, however, there is in fact an interweaving of perspectives.

All that remains is for us to give our thanks! First and foremost, we would like (and this is associated with very unprecarious knowledge) to thank the authors; this *Festschrift* would not have come to exist in this form without their dedication. All of them have taken on the challenge of entering potentially new realms in the context of a commemorative publication. It is not least this approach which seems to us extremely appropriate for a volume that aims to pay tribute to Birgit Weyel's research achievements. That it is important consistently to challenge Practical Theology critically and innovatively, to develop its self-understanding and its research work further and to formulate substantive contributions to religious research through the lens of cultural science – this we can learn from Birgit Weyel!

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