

# Decoloniality, Theology and the Studies Retreat Space

Thandi Soko-de Jong

## Introduction

This essay is an abridged version of a presentation titled “*Decoloniality, Heritage and Theology*”, delivered at the Moravian Studies Retreat in Ebersdorf, Germany, on 13 February 2026, under the theme *Postcolonial Theology*. It examines why decoloniality matters for theological discourse within Moravian and broader Christian spaces.

## Terminology

This essay focuses on European colonisation, which evolved from the Doctrine of Discovery (15th century CE) through the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) into ongoing neocolonisation. Unlike empires of incorporation (e.g. Mughal, Ottoman, Chinese), European colonisation was fundamentally extractivist,<sup>1</sup> that is, centred on the appropriation of valuable resources, land, and labour.

Among key responses to colonisation and its ongoing impact (coloniality),<sup>2</sup> two key terms are distinguished: decolonisation and decoloniality (where colonised nations gain political independence from their colonisers). To distinguish them, the analogy of a home is useful:

- *Decolonisation* is like making sure an unwelcome stranger leaves your house.
- *Decoloniality* is cleaning up your house after the stranger leaves.<sup>3</sup>

In practice, given widespread neocolonisation, the two are often pursued simultaneously: liberation from ongoing domination alongside healing from its historical legacies.

## Taking Stock

Understanding colonisation’s influence on history is essential to understanding the present and potentially shaping a better, more just and equitable future. The Ghanaian *Sankofa*

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on extractivism, see for example Ortega-Urbe, Tamara & Tomas Ocampo. 2023. “Extractivism.” *Keywords in Political Economy: A Critical Glossary for Critical Minds*. Department of Politics, University of California, Santa Cruz. Available online: <https://keywords.sites.ucsc.edu/2023/09/29/extractivism/>

<sup>2</sup> See Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2007. “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept.” *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3): 240–270, 243, DOI: 10.1080/095023806011625482007.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Mumbi Mucharia summarises arguments presented in her master’s thesis titled “‘*Eastlando Sitawahi Hama*’: Expressing Identity and Belonging through Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Hoods in Nairobi.” 2024. Master’s thesis. The University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen. The summary is available online: Lisa Mumbi Mucharia (@mumbipoetry), ‘the revolution is epistemic ☐☐☐ sharing some gems on what it means to decolonize the mind, & knowledge I’ve learnt in my time of reading Ngugi wa Thiong’o.’ *Instagram*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DKcy2YmMXZ4/?hl=en>.

symbol captures this: progress requires knowing and learning from history. Scholars like Glenn Willemsen have made a similar point with a driving analogy — a driver must check the rear-view mirror carefully to navigate forward safely.<sup>4</sup> This logic applies equally to church and theological spaces, where theologies of decoloniality critically assess how Church and missionary policies distorted, suppressed, commodified, or demonised colonised peoples' heritage to entrench Eurocentric Christianity.

Complex theological tensions remain in the aftermath. Some post-colonial Christian traditions emphasise “total depravity” (Romans 3:23)<sup>5</sup>, viewing all people as equally sinful and in equal need of redemption; others stress predestination (as in Calvinism), which has historically been used to justify dominion over those deemed “non-elect” or “heathen.” This is countered by traditions that assert the *imago Dei* — rooted in Genesis 1:27a<sup>6</sup> — affirm that all humans equally bear God's image without God's preference of one society over another.

In my view, theologies grounded in the concept of the *imago Dei* facilitate decoloniality: they resist the imposition of colonisers' systems, support the restoration of colonised peoples' autonomy, and recognise that the (formerly) colonised each contribute uniquely to God's work on Earth — without requiring the abandonment of their God-given heritages.

### **A Seat at the Table?**

My visit to the Moravian Studies Retreat in Ebersdorf was my first. I experienced it as a structured space to engage with and challenge dominant narratives about colonialism and its influence on Christianity. In addition to the themes raised so far in this essay, my presentation also highlighted the “table” metaphor. Many depictions of the Berlin Conference (the event that set in motion the colonial expansion of European powers into Africa) typically show European and American representatives<sup>7</sup> gathered around a table, notably with no African representatives or voices present. This absence illustrates a colonial logic embedded in the very metaphor of “having a seat at the table.”

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn Willemsen, “Interview met Glenn Willemsen directeur van NiNsee,” *YouTube*, January 12 2009, Interview (Dutch), 2:20 to 2:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTok4CHVQ8Y&t=241s>

<sup>5</sup> “[...] all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” New International Version.

<sup>6</sup> “So God created humans in [God's] image, in the image of God [God] created them”. New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway, Turkey, and the United States of America.

The table metaphor assumes a privileged centre where a select few make decisions for those absent. Even when marginalised groups gain access, their participation can be conditional: the agenda, goals, and terms of engagement remain set by those who hold or have historically held power. Securing a seat does not guarantee that one’s voice will be heard or will effect change.<sup>8</sup>

A meaningful challenge to (historically) exclusive “tables” of influence whether in church and missionary structures or studies retreats, is rooted in the Gospel itself: if the Gospel is truly Good News for all people, then all who believe must have equal and meaningful access to their decision-making spaces. Beyond challenging exclusivity, it is crucial for the (formerly) colonised to critically engage these spaces. Where they choose to participate, at minimum, it should be expected that their voices will be safeguarded against conditional inclusion, financial dependencies or other limitations. This is one of the ways their voices can better reflect their processes of *sankofa* in the light of decoloniality.

Thandi Soko-de Jong is from Malawi. Together with her family she lives in the Netherlands.

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<sup>8</sup> See discussion by Kwesi Pratt available via Ministry Of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Ghana 19 December, 2025. “Diaspora Summit 2025: Day 1.” Ministry Of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Ghana. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LQxvVkZ6Zc>