

“The universal word speaks only in dialect”

Postcolonial Impulses for an Ecumenism of Sensual Unity and an Aesthetic Ecumenical Theology

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Abstract

Postcolonial theories announce an “exit”: the departure from the West as the world’s centre of gravity and from Eurocentric hegemonic claims of superiority, turning away from the universal, and placing unheard voices at the centre – those who are excluded from academic, public, and political discourse. Such stories and histories of the margins do not simply represent “other” stories from the “periphery.” Rather, the stories of the margins are constitutive for the history of Europe and the invention of European modernity. Today’s manifestations of global Christianity are no exception to these dynamics. There are various models of alternative universalisms and conceptions of unity, where the crucial questions are: who defines the unity of the churches and has the monopoly over interpretation and – related to this, but a little more radically – whether such a formulation of unity must necessarily repeat Western grammar or whether there are not entirely other grammars and epistemologies of unity. Postcolonial theories and postcolonial practices in particular offer promising perspectives in dealing with these questions.

Keywords

postcolonial, intercultural theology, universalism, ecumenical theology, aesthetics

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Is Postcolonial Critique Anti-Universal and Counter-Unity?

Postcolonial theories announce an “exit”¹: the departure from the West as the world’s centre of gravity and from Eurocentric hegemonic claims of superiority.² The West’s universalist claims have long since been unmasked as particularisms – whether the belief in the universality of Western values, knowledge culture, and science, or the “neo-liberal universalism of the unhindered, free flow of capital.”³

Postcolonial analyses turn away from the universal and place unheard voices at the centre: those who are excluded from academic, public, and political discourse, the “invisible,” who seem insignificant and disposable, who are not seen and for whom no one wants to take responsibility.⁴ The emphasis is on the particular and the local. This can develop – according to one reproach against Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak⁵ – into an essentialist or even fundamentalist exaltation of the authentic and what is one’s own, the non-Western. In contrast, another position – most notably represented by Homi Bhabha – emphasizes the hybrid, the mixture, the negotiation, the non-authentic, the *mélange*.⁶ This represents a camouflaged strategy of resistance against the hegemonic superiority of the West. Hybridity can also be diluted into a multicultural lifestyle: products from different cultures are mixed and consumed in cross-over.⁷

Particularity, blending, homogenization, and universality are thus in a dynamic relationship. Globalization theorists such as Roland Robertson or Manuel Castells, world systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, and even their postcolonial critics such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos agree on this. The latter in particular, however, points out that the relationship between the particular and the universal is far from being peaceful

¹ This is an edited translation of an article published in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 70:1 (2021), 42–56, under the title, “Das universale Wort spricht nur Dialekt’: Postkoloniale Impulse für eine Ökumene der sinnlichen Einheit und eine ästhetische ökumenische Theologie.”

² Vitor Westhelle, *After Heresy: Colonial Practices and Post-Colonial Theologies* (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), viii.

³ Oliver Marchart, “Ein Universalismus des anderen Übersetzung und der antagonistische Grund des Medialen,” in *Medienbewegungen. Praktiken der Bezugnahme*, ed. Ludwig Jäger, Gisela Fehrmann, and Meike Adam (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 163–74, at 166.

⁴ See Westhelle, *After Heresy*, xvii.

⁵ See Jean-Loup Amselle, *L’Occident décroché: Enquête sur les postcolonialismes* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

⁶ See Elisabeth Bronfen and Marius Benjamin, eds, *Hybride Kulturen: Beiträge zur angloamerikanischen Multikulturalitätsdebatte* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1997).

⁷ See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Der Melange-Effekt,” in *Perspektiven der Weltgesellschaft*, ed. Ulrich Beck (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 87–124, at 101.

or even just. Rather, globalization is leading to the "end of the South" and the "disappearance of the Third World."⁸

Representatives of postcolonial theories attempt to counter this scenario using a variety of approaches. There is also a clear interest within the ecumenical movement in such an approach, as emphasized recently by the paradigm of "mission from the margins." Dipesh Chakrabarty's project "Provincializing Europe"⁹ is significant in this regard. He emphasizes that the stories and histories of the margins do not simply represent "other" stories, nor are they to be contrasted with the "centre" as stories from the so-called periphery. Rather, the stories of the margins are constitutive for the history of Europe and the invention of European modernity. It is precisely this that needs to be made visible:

To attempt to provincialize this "Europe" is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of "tradition" that "modernity" creates.¹⁰

Today's manifestations of global Christianity are no exception to these dynamics. The insight that there are "different hybrid forms of Christianity between particularity and universality"¹¹ is the reason why the name "*intercultural* theology" has been given to the university discipline that focuses on the global interconnections of Christianity. Furthermore, the history of non-European Christianity – especially in the works of Klaus Koschorke – shows that Christianity's "polycentric structures" did not exist only in "post-missionary and post-colonial" times.¹² There were various centres of regional scale that influenced each other and that existed centuries earlier. Therefore, in terms of the significance of Christianity, Europe was for a long time, if not a province, then at least only one centre among others.

Unlike in the subjects mentioned above, for the ecumenical movement, polycentricity and the diversity of Christianity – regardless of our appreciation of these particular expressions – are not purely descriptive matters. As the child of a time when great

⁸ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Os Processos da Globalização," in *A Globalização e as Ciências Sociais* (São Paulo: Cortez, 2002), 25; Pieterse, "Der Melange-Effekt," 104.

⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, reissued with a new introduction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹¹ Klaus Hock, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2011), 149.

¹² Klaus Koschorke, "Polyzentrische Strukturen der globalen Christentumsgeschichte," in *Intercultural Perceptions and Prospects of World Christianity*, ed. Richard Friedli et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 105–26, at 106 f.

philosophical and political projects for the unity of humanity were in the air, the “Ut omnes unum sint!” (John 17:21) still forms the appellative and normative heart of ecumenism. Unity has never meant treating confessional or cultural differences as if they don’t exist – quite the contrary. Especially in recent times, the ecumenical movement has come to see difference as a central and enlivening factor of unity.¹³ Nevertheless, even in more recent documents, such as the Faith and Order publication *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*,¹⁴ the central questions remain: What links the Christian churches and communities? What unites them? Yes, what even brings about – in the sense of the ecumenical formulation of Leuenberg – “reconciliation” in their diversity?

This tension is not easy to resolve. Postcolonial approaches such as Chakrabarty’s support a self-critical analysis of the historical genesis of this and other ideas of unity, and for this very reason they call for an “exit” from the Eurocentric claims to universality that have also guided theology and the church for long periods. Thus, the ecumenical endeavour for unity is put to the test in a fundamental way: Can such an endeavour still be justified today – and, if so, under what conditions? Surely the experiences of colonialism – with its exploitation of other countries and the destructive, violent obliteration of entire cultures – show that visions of common humanistic-Christian values have failed.¹⁵

Postcolonial theologians such as Pacific theologian Upolu Vaai have also traced the intellectual theological structures that support colonial hegemonic claims.¹⁶ A “one-truth ideology” has limited diversity and marginalized dissenting voices. Protestant mission theology, according to Vaai, has been shaped by the idea of one God, one religion, one truth, one way of interpreting, one language, and one culture. This idea of the one and universal – the “one-size-fits-all”¹⁷ – was further supported by the focus on the individual in Reformation theology and the Enlightenment and the undermining of the importance of the ecology of social relations that went with it. Furthermore, the Reformation’s central ideas of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, which are interpreted dogmatically and rigidly in many churches in the Pacific region, exclude the diversity of *stories*:

¹³ See, for example, Ulrich H. J. Körtner, *Wohin steuert die Ökumene? Vom Konsens – zum Differenzmodell* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

¹⁴ World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>.

¹⁵ On this expression, see Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture” [speech at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome, 1959], in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 145–80, at 170. According to Fanon, colonial rule is so “sweeping [and] leveling” that it has led to the “cultural obliteration” of colonized countries.

¹⁶ Upolu Luma Vaai, “Relational Theology and Reforming the Pacific,” in *Reflecting Reformation and the Call for Renewal in a Globalized and Post-Colonial World*, ed. Claudia Jahnel (Neuendettelsau: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2018), 201–14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

"teachings such as *sola fide* came to reinforce a faith that can only be realised when the people's stories and culture is kept outside of the church."¹⁸

The Limits of Particularism

Nevertheless, remaining with particularism is also not an alternative, neither for ecumenism nor for society as a whole. For one thing, it misses the particular–universal dynamic discussed above. Underlying this dynamic is a process of translation of cultures which, "whether assimilative or agonistic, is a complex act that generates borderline affects and identifications, 'peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash.'"¹⁹ Moreover, concepts that elevate particularity to a normative principle also build on assumptions of universal validity, sometimes implicitly reproducing colonial notions of superiority – as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has underlined, for example, in the modern rhetoric of multiculturalism.²⁰ Finally, the particularism of subalterns must also be seen as highly ambivalent. According to Stuart Hall, the emphasis on cultural difference promotes historically marginalized groups to "*produce themselves as new subjects,*" but it also supports "a certain kind of reethnicization of the cultural politics of difference."²¹

Particularism is also viewed with concern in the ecumenical movement. For example, the former general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Olav Fykse Tveit, writes in the foreword to *TCTCV*: "There are tendencies toward fragmentation and more attention to what is uniting the few rather than the many."²² Whether by the "few" he means the squad of European–North American ecumenists who, in relative cultural homogeneity and in numerous authoritative bi- and multilateral dialogues, formulate a dogmatic confessional consensus remains a matter of conjecture. It could also be that the warning is addressed to those actors who, since about the turn of the millennium, see themselves united in an anti-empire critique and are countering the

¹⁸ Ibid., 206 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul de Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 54, incorporating a quotation from T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), 64.

²⁰ See Slavoj Žižek, "Lenin's Choice," in *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin* (London: Verso, 2002), 171.

²¹ Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 124 (emphasis in original).

²² World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, v.

universalist claims of the (ecumenical) empire with subversive counter-histories of the subaltern and the “unsatisfied.”²³

Susan Durber, moderator of the WCC’s Faith and Order commission, has also expressed concern about particularistic tendencies in world Christianity. In her presentation of *TCTCV* at the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Arusha, 2018, she stressed that a vision of unity today must avoid old colonializing or new imperial universalizing ideas that in reality represent particular interests.²⁴ It is therefore important to maintain that the communion and unity of the churches is God-given and not based on particular cultural interests.

Alternative Models of Universalism

The communion of churches that Durber sees as desirable and describes as “counter-cultural” appears to be intended to outline an alternative to hegemonic ideas of unity. Durber is thus in the company of those who today, due to the “structural crisis of the modern world system,”²⁵ speak of the end of the “era of European universalism”²⁶ and call for more universal universalisms. In view of the unsustainability of European universalism and the stagnation of particularism, the decisive question is not whether the search for common values and a common vision is meaningful and legitimate. Rather, the central issue is how *universal* and planetary unifying ideas really are. Various postcolonial thinkers argue for a new universalism along these lines. A pioneer of this idea was, for example, Léopold Senghor,²⁷ who advocated the now very idealistic idea of a “civilized universalism.” Following Senghor’s idea of a world society as a “*rendez-vous du*

²³ The description comes from Homi K. Bhabha, “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” in *Text and Narration: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*, ed. Laura Garcia-Moreno and Peter C. Pfeiffer (Columbia: Camden House, 1996), 191–207. For a more extensive treatment, see Claudia Jahnel, “Vernakular-kosmopolitische Ökumene, oder, Einheit von den Margins und Fissuren her denken,” in *Gemeinsam Christsein: Potenziale und Ressourcen einer Theologie der Ökumene für das 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Rebekka Klein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 203–23.

²⁴ Susan Durber, “Mission – Unity and Diversity,” in *Moving in the Spirit: Report of the World Council of Churches Conference on World Mission and Evangelism*, ed. Risto Jukko and Jooseop Keum (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), 95–96, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/moving-in-the-spirit>.

²⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* (New York: New Press, 2006), 85.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁷ See Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “On the Postcolonial and the Universal?” *Rue Descartes* 78:2 (2013), 7–18, at 7, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-rue-descartes-2013-2-page-7.htm>.

donner et du recevoir,"²⁸ Wallerstein calls for a non-hierarchical "network of universal universalisms."²⁹ If a universalism can be meaningful and just at all, then it can only be one in which "*all would be givers and receivers*."³⁰ Complementing this notion, Souleymane Bachir Diagne develops the idea of a "lateral universalism" characterized by continuous lateral translation processes of different perspectives and truth claims. It is not a common universal grammar that connects the different universalist claims, but the exchange and the open-ended and continuous process of translation.³¹

As was already clear in Durber's address, there are at the moment also various models of alternative concepts about universalism and unity in the ecumenical movement, ranging from "receptive ecumenism" to "vernacular cosmopolitanism" to an ecumenism of similarity and fractalities.³² It is thus crucial to ask who defines the unity of the churches and has the monopoly of interpretation and – related to this, but a little more radically – whether such a formulation of unity must necessarily repeat Western grammar, or whether other, very different, grammars and epistemologies of unity are possible. Postcolonial theories and postcolonial practices in particular offer promising perspectives.

A Necessary Interruption

In order to present alternative postcolonial grammars, I need to interrupt our train of thought so far. This interruption deliberately follows Spivak's call to interrupt the "grand narratives" of colonial tradition with subaltern narratives and to create "counter-places."³³ For the question of the unity of the church, it seems fruitful to refer to a particular postcolonial practice that is often blanked out but is central to the development of postcolonial theory, namely the intensive engagement of postcolonial theory with art and aesthetics. This dimension of postcolonial theory also opens up new spaces of communication for the question of the unity of the church, for it addresses the sensual side of knowledge, cultures, religion, and theology, as well as unity and ecumenism. Hand in hand with the postcolonial critique of the colonial privileging of the *written*

²⁸ Wallerstein, *European Universalism*, 84 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. (emphasis in original).

³¹ Diagne, "On the Postcolonial," 17.

³² See, for example, the contributions in Klein, *Gemeinsam Christsein*.

³³ See María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postcoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung*, 2nd ed. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 156–63.

text,³⁴ postcolonial artists and filmmakers demand an epistemic pluralism, which they also implement performatively in their works. In this way, they generate systems of a sensual-bodily perception of the world – *aisthesis* in the Aristotelian understanding – that corrects the one-sided dominance of a discursive-rational understanding of the world.³⁵

“Something has gone wrong. Now they combine the worst of both worlds”: A Dystopia of Unity

“The Messiah is in a bad mood!” These are the words, as recounted in the film *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Colombia 2015, directed by Ciro Guerra, Mexico), with which the shaman Karamakate and the US biologist Richard Evans Schultes are greeted by members of a Christian sect in a Colombian village. Schultes is in search of the intoxicating and medicinal plant Yakruna and needs Karamakate’s knowledge and guidance to find it. The chaos of the sect gathered around a self-proclaimed Brazilian messiah is reminiscent of Josef Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The travellers escape the situation only because Karamakate administers a drug to the cult members in a festive ritual that causes them to literally eat the body of their “messiah.” “Something has gone wrong. Now they are combining the worst of both worlds” is how Karamakate comments on the chaos. In an interview, director Ciro Guerra described the scene as a staging of a dystopia. The scene conveys an idea of what the world would look like if there were no dialogue between the cultures: “There’s just violence – cultures stacked on top of each other in a violent way . . . a nightmare. We drew inspiration from paintings, mostly Goya and El Greco, to create this atmosphere of a horror.”³⁶

Karamakate, according to the film narrative, had stayed in the village 40 years earlier – a number reminiscent of the people of Israel’s 40-year wandering in the wilderness or the 40 days of Jesus’ temptations. At that time, there was a Catholic mission station there and Karamakate was in the company of a German ethnographer, Theodor Koch-Grünberg. The researcher, who was seriously ill, was also looking for the Yakruna plant for his own recovery. At the mission station, a Capuchin monk, Gaspar, “educates” orphans from the rubber industry to become Christians. This education includes speaking only in Spanish, singing hymns, reading the Bible and, more than anything else, being on

³⁴ See, for example, Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁵ See Alexandra Grieser, “Aesthetics,” in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, vol. 1, ed. Kocku von Stuckrad and Robert Segal (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 14–23.

³⁶ Vadim Rizov, “Five Boats on the River: Ciro Guerra on Embrace of the Serpent – Interview with Ciro Guerra,” *Filmmaker*, 16 February 2016, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/97332-five-boats-on-the-river-ciro-guerra-on-embrace-of-the-serpent/#.XyMhsfgzbOR>.

the receiving end of corporal punishment for misbehaviour. Karamakate is not deterred by the monk's restrictions. He talks to the children in their own language and gives them lessons about the different medicinal plants and their own tradition. When the monk whips the children for this, he is killed in the scuffle, whereupon the travellers have to leave as quickly as possible. They have to leave the disoriented orphans behind. These orphans later become the followers of the cult around the self-proclaimed Messiah. The dystopian unity – the blending of the worst of both worlds – thus results from the violent imposition of an alien faith and through the destruction of the indigenous culture portrayed as sapient, holistic-natural, and diverse (a total of nine indigenous languages are spoken in the film).

The film contrasts this dystopia with a heterotopia in the relationship that develops between Karamakate and his two companions. It is an alternative performance of "unity" in which all three change. Koch-Grünberg represents ethnographic science, which regards the other culture as the object of its research, sets it down in written form, and claims interpretive power over it. He needs the shaman and his knowledge, which originates in unity with nature, in order to heal. The transformation of Evans, the biologist who cannot dream, culminates in a psychedelic, consciousness-expanding vision of unity that, with its echoes of magical realism, transcends purely rational-economic orders of knowledge. Karamakate's transformation consists of finding his lost identity and memory with the help of Evans.

Postcolonial Aesthetics as an Impulse for the Unity of the Church

El abrazo de la serpiente narrates the path of a dialogue that does not reconcile different conceptions of reality and truth. The translation of cultures here indeed evokes "peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash." However, remaining stuck with the untranslatability of cultural particularities and thus a particularism – with a world without dialogue – is not an alternative that Ciro Guerra advocates. Despite the misunderstandings, the film can be understood as a project of translating different epistemologies: indigenous knowledge is made accessible by aesthetic means and in epic images; the alternation of calm, flowing images and "impressionistic close-ups"³⁷ captivates the viewer and makes a distanced othering and a colonial exoticization of the foreign culture impossible; otherness and foreignness are not, however, completely eclipsed. The images illustrate the "process of becoming aware, of merging with the cycles of nature."³⁸ This process of realization and insight into the other culture of knowledge is

³⁷ Andreas Busche, "Der Schamane und die Schlange": Psychedelischer Trip ins Kolonialzeitalter," *Zeit online*, 21 April 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/film/2016-04/schamane-schlange-film-ciro-guerra-amazonas>.

³⁸ Busche, *Der Schamane*.

also experienced by the viewers. In a manner typical of postcolonial film, *El abrazo de la serpiente* offers a new, decolonizing, and deorientalizing form of visualizing marginalized cultures and their epistemologies.³⁹ Unlike an ethnographic-colonial documentary, Guerra's work does not speak "about" the other by flaunting primitivism, but stages proximity – it speaks "nearby"⁴⁰ – in relational representation. Whether the film nevertheless also contains an exoticizing and dichotomizing connotation is something that needs to be discussed.

What do approaches of postcolonial theory and especially postcolonial aesthetics now contribute to ecumenism and the struggle for unity? I will conclude by outlining two examples.

Ecumenism of sensual unity: Plea for an aesthetic ecumenical theology and ethics

Sensual perception, as portrayed in the film, is not something that is alien to ecumenism but is one of its fundamental elements. Celebration in prayer, song, dance, or on the path of pilgrimage wants to enable an encounter "nearby," which touches, affects, reduces distance and *othering*, and makes unity tangible at a sensual-aesthetic level without dissolving differences. These represent central prerequisites for the development of an aesthetic ecumenical theology, which addresses the person in their material existence and interpersonal and cosmic relationality.⁴¹ The central question posed by the film is whether the unity that is expressed in an aesthetic and performative fashion, and a knowledge of unity that to a large extent (only) reveals itself sensually, is understood as a form of unity that stands on an equal footing with consensus papers and linguistic formulations of unity.

This presupposes something that is by no means self-evident (even) within theology: namely, that bodily knowledge is also accorded the status of knowledge, as demanded by the phenomenology of the body following Merleau-Ponty, for example.⁴² This is a key question for the ecumenical movement and its understanding of unity, since here inter-bodily encounter and communication is of central importance. Such

³⁹ See Sandra Ponzanesi, "Postcolonial Theory in Film," Oxford Bibliographies online, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0284.xml.

⁴⁰ See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage – From the Firelight to the Screen* (Film, USA, 1982).

⁴¹ These reflections on an aesthetic ecumenical theology tie in with recent developments in theology and religious studies, such as the works on aesthetic theology by Klaas Huizing or more recent aesthetic religious studies. See "Die religionswissenschaftliche Teildisziplin Religionsästhetik," *Verkündigung und Forschung* 64:2 (2019).

⁴² Let me mention only one publication from this comprehensive field of research as an example: Käte Meyer-Drawe, "Wenn Blicke sich kreuzen: Zur Bedeutung der Sichtbarkeit für zwischenmenschliche Begegnungen," in *Verkörperung zwischen Leib erleben und kulturellem Sinn*, Studien zur interdisziplinären Anthropologie, ed. Matthias Jung, Michaela Bauks, and Andreas Ackermann (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016), 38–54.

communication is multifaceted, ambivalent, and full of unpredictability and surprises.⁴³ In its liveliness, it has something exuberant that cannot be entirely put into words.

The ecumenical movement, however, appears to have difficulty with the insights of a sense-based epistemology and an epistemological pluralism as demanded by postcolonial aesthetics. When global ecumenical assemblies "present" the so-called margins, for example, this is often done by emphasizing visual (clothing) and auditory (drumming) particularities. These *performances* tend to generate a folkloristic impression. Here, the cultures that are presented and their nature-related, relational knowledge are changed and projected back into an earlier time. An expansion of consciousness staged through confusing breaks and new perspectives, as *El abrazo de la serpiente* undertakes, seems to be of as little relevance here as the idea that the knowledge of the cultures being presented is equivalent to Western forms of knowledge.

However, it is precisely this equivalence of different forms of knowledge that representatives of postcolonial theory and aesthetics demand. According to Achille Mbembe, it is important to realize that "Western metaphysics" and its exclusive linking of "God and reason" is a particular Eurocentric narrative⁴⁴ that is by no means shared by all. In many of the Pentecostal congregations in the African context, truth is seen as an experience rather than an argument: "It presents itself immediately, in the power of revelation directly from God."⁴⁵ Mbembe also interprets glossolalia in this sense: they are a political and aesthetic project, a kind of "linguistic epiphany" that overcomes the "night of language" – the colonial reduction of African diversity of language, thought, and perception – and overwrites orthodox Western notions of truth and reality with alternative narratives.⁴⁶

A central impulse of postcolonial aesthetics for the question of the unity of the church is thus the inclusion of other forms of knowledge, in particular of sensory and body-related epistemologies, and the equal recognition of experiences of unity and "statements" that are more based on "implicit knowledge" and precisely not on "propositional

⁴³ See Thomas Alkemeyer, "Bedingte Un/Verfügbarkeit: Zur Kritik des praxeologischen Körpers," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 44:3 (2019), 289–312.

⁴⁴ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Religion, Politics, Theology: A Conversation with Achille Mbembe," *Boundary* 2:34 (2007), 149–70, at 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴⁶ See Jesse Weaver Shipley, "Africa in Theory: A Conversation Between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe," *Anthropological Quarterly* 83:3 (2010), 653–78, at 661. Mbembe's concern is not to justify fundamentalizing functionalizations of emotions or the functionalization of religion and religious aesthetics for political purposes, but to offer space to other, sensual and body-related approaches to truth and the perception of reality.

knowledge” whose validity is “owed to rational procedures and convictions.”⁴⁷ Such sense-based knowledge is by no means to be regarded – in an exoticizing manner – as the proprium of cultures of the global South. Rather, the “hegemony of Western metaphysics” mentioned by Mbembe also affects the global North. The continuously growing attention given to the body even in the so-called industrialized countries shows that here the body and sensual-bodily experiences are regarded as instances of meaning. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that it is in the global South that the body is much more involved in theologies. The bodily experience of oppression, violence, pain, and liberation forces theological reflection about this experience. Liberation theologians such as Jaci Maraschin, Rubem Alves, and Leonardo Boff have already underlined that the suffering body – the crucified God – must be the starting point for theological reflection. The famous liberation theological paradigm “God’s preferential option for the poor” therefore also implies giving a central place to the bodily experiences.

From such a perspective of an aesthetic ecumenical theology, the unity of the church always means unity in solidarity and action. Because of the insight into one’s own physical vulnerability, it is important to take sides for the protection and rights of people whose vulnerability receives little or no recognition.

Unity with creation

The unity in action for the protection of vulnerable groups discussed above cannot be reduced to human beings alone. *El abrazo de la serpiente* points clearly to the need for direction for unity with creation as well. The indigenous knowledge culture that Karamakate represents is characterized by a dependence on nature and communion with the whole of creation. Even if the portrayal of the closeness to nature of indigenous cultures runs the risk of exoticizing them, the film points to the need to liberate the question of the unity of the church and Christianity from its anthropocentric reduction.

In recent times, postcolonial theory has increasingly exposed the connection between (continuing) colonialism and the destruction of nature.⁴⁸ It has demonstrated that there is a direct line from the colonial exploitation of nature to the binary logic that separates reason and nature, God and the world, soul and body, spirit and matter. This logic supports the anthropocentric notion of human domination of nature and undermines interdependence, diversity, and unity.

⁴⁷ Jens Loenhoff, “Einleitung,” in *Implizites Wissen: Epistemologische und handlungstheoretische Perspektiven* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012), 7–27, at 8.

⁴⁸ George B. Handley, “What Else Is New? Toward a Postcolonial Christian Theology for the Anthropocene,” *Religions* 11:5 (2020), 225, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11050225>.

An aesthetic conception of such unity – as sensually staged in the film – can be found particularly among representatives of postcolonial ecofeminist theology and spirituality, such as the Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara. She emphasizes a holistic understanding of unity with nature that includes body and reason, because, according to her epistemological presupposition, "Reason is nothing other than our body being aware of itself and of the world. Therefore, embodied reason expresses itself through multiple activities and creativities."⁴⁹

Gebara's reflections also have eminently ethical implications, on universal as well as particular levels. One could call Gebara's universalism a form of ethical universalism:

This kind of new universalism, as some will call it, is not the universal imperialism of the capitalist market that sells cultural diversity as folklore. Nor is it the religious imperialism of the various faith communities that believe themselves to be in possession of the truth. It is the universal necessity of survival on our planet with all our similarities and diversities . . . To this foundation must be radically attached the new perception that we are all parts of the same living body, connected to the whole earth, the stars, the solar system and ultimately the whole cosmos.⁵⁰

But this universalism and "global understanding of creation" that Gebara demands needs to be tied to the particular and begin at the local level, "in our homes, in our creative daily actions, with our bodies. We should start to feel our streets as our bodies."⁵¹ Postcolonial-aesthetic impulses toward unity with creation as well as toward ecumenical unity are thus anything but harmless or apolitical. Body-sense-related experiences are controlled by powerful political and economic interests, by regimes of the aesthetic that already prescribe the interpretation of experience.⁵² Postcolonial aesthetics is an aesthetics of resistance, of rebellion, against colonial aesthetic regimes of domination, of separation as well as the monotony of the eternally same and the only one form of knowledge. In Gebara's challenging formulations, we can begin to see how an aesthetic ecumenical unity can also be thought and lived as an aesthetics of rebellion – out of the experience of unity with creation and of being touched by the other.

⁴⁹ Ivone Gebara, "10 Años de Con-spirando," *Con-spirando* 40 (2002), 3–13, at 7, quoted by Heike Walz, ". . . nicht mehr männlich und weiblich . . . ?" *Ekklesiologie und Geschlecht in ökumenischem Horizont* (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2006), 297.

⁵⁰ Ivone Gebara, "Das Seufzen der Schöpfung und unser Seufzen," in *Das Seufzen der Schöpfung. Ökofeministische Beiträge aus Lateinamerika*, ed. Bärbel Fünfsinn and Christa Zinn (Hamburg: Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, 1998), 25–36, at 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵² See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2006).

“The universal word speaks only dialect”

Pedro Casaldáliga, the recently deceased “bishop of the poor,” coined the phrase “The universal word speaks only dialect.”⁵³ This offers space to the central insight of inculturation theory that Christianity changes and has to change in the process of inculturating the gospel. Postcolonial theory and aesthetics go one step further and in this they underline the continuing relevance of Casaldáliga’s statement. They provincialize the supposed centre, Europe, and its forms of knowledge and ideas of unity, and expose them as a dialect of its own and precisely not as a “universal language.” Europe’s forms of knowledge and interpretations of the word of God are also only a dialect. Postcolonial theories demand the recognition of epistemic pluralism and encourage the incorporation of sensory-bodily levels of unity as well as diversity into the ecumenical search for unity.

⁵³ Pedro Casaldáliga, *Creio na Justiça e na Esperança* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978), 211, quoted by Vítor Westhelle, “Transfiguring Lutheranism: Being Lutheran in New Contexts,” in *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2008), 20.