

**Decolonizing and Decentering Whiteness in Christian Worship**

***Creating a Liberating Liturgical Practice in the Public Square***

**A Dissertation submitted to the**

**Drew Theological School**

**for the degree**

**Doctor of Ministry**

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**Madison, New Jersey**

**August 2021**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **DeCentering and DeColonizing Whiteness in Christian Worship**

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Every Sunday morning, whether for an hour or more--depending on your community—our sacred gathering time is the most common and can be the most consistent public witness Christians do. It is in this space, amid celebration and ritual that we grapple with the pathos and ethos of the Divine, as well as what that means in our daily living when we end our gathering and go back home. In this dissertation and project presentation, I will argue that everything we do in our weekly gatherings helps us confront what is and proclaim what is yet to come and if we are committed to the work of building the reign of God as part of our public witness, then it is imperative that we look at the ways in which Christian worship, particularly in this nation but not limited to it, has been shaped and influenced by colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy and European exceptionalism. If we are to be intentional about developing congregations that are committed to being inclusive, anti-racist and egalitarian, the priority of this work must begin by deconstructing and reshaping our worship so that it reflects the transformative work of the Spirit.

The scope of this dissertation will present an argument as to the importance of this decentering work and provide website-based tools to help congregations and leaders do this important work.

## **DEDICATION**

This paper emerges from the fires of the most difficult and painful two years of my life. Not only was I dealing with the 2020 pandemic, but also with the infidelity and subsequent death of my spouse which led to a series of transitions, change and crisis.

I have always been committed to the work of providing transformational worship both at my local church and at any event I'm asked to provide leadership. However, I am often left wanting more when I try to create something that not only speaks to a community's realities but to my own. So much of our worship resources are not relevant nor do they speak to the real concerns in the communities, families and lives of people of color. Not only is this true but much of our worship continues to promote and implement the same an oppressive piety that lacks the prophetic valor to confront its own complicity in conforming to whiteness.

This has been the reality in my ministry for the last 20+ years. I spent the most of them in cross-racial, cross-cultural congregations sometimes being the only person of color in the congregation, let alone the first woman pastor. Throughout my experience, I have noticed how important it was for the congregations I served, particularly the white congregations, for me to understand their worship style and pass the litmus test for my leadership. This test included how much expertise I had in hymnody that came from Europe; in traditional white homogenous worship rubrics with a heavy emphasis on penitence, repentance without truth telling; and in liturgy that expressed allegiance to country, the military; and assimilation into the majority culture.

Confronting the truth has been a theme that has been close to my heart these past two years even at great personal cost, and this work is part of that truth-telling. It is my hope that as I have found liberation in confronting the truth, this dissertation and project will help leaders and

congregations commit to and experience that the truth does indeed set us free. Indeed, where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom!

I want to thank the congregation of Swarthmore United Methodist Church for allowing me to test my theories and arguments in their midst and for holding my feet and in this case my fingers to the keyboards to get this work done. There are so many in the congregation that I owe a debt of gratitude, but I especially would like to thank Rev. Bruce Stephens, a distinguished Druid himself who kept me to my task and constantly pushed me to continue writing.

Deep gratitude for my cohort at Drew Theological School; you all embody the public witness this world is waiting for. #BadAss Group (you know who you are), I LOVE YOU! Grateful for the professors at Drew that made our learning and creativity possible. I also want to thank my sister, Miriam Richardson, for her faithful love and FaceTime calls of encouragement. I am grateful to my best friend, super Deacon Doris Dalton for her spirit, spastic energy and teaching me to cry freely when the Spirit says to cry. May thanks to Joanne Miles for your selfless giving and consistency. I am forever and eternally grateful for my daughter, Willow, who's truth reminds me every day what brave looks like. Gratitude for my dog Max because he is the most loyal partner I could every ask for on those long nights of writing. Finally, I give honor to my ancestors and my community, for the love, passion, commitment to liberation and music they have injected me with in my veins like *café*. Yo soy Boricua, pa' que tu lo sepas!

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## **Introduction**

Every week faith communities gather in old sanctuary spaces, warehouses, homes, storefronts, coffee shops and even bars. We gather to tell stories, we share our pain and our joys, we sing and learn each other's songs and we do that through ritual, sacraments and repetition. Whether we gather for an hour or more, depending on your community, this sacred time is the most common and can be the most consistent public witness we do. It is in this space, in the midst of celebration and ritual we grapple with the pathos and ethos of the Divine, as well as what that means in our daily living when we end our gathering and go back home. Leonardo Boff stated, "In the spirit of Jesus, true worship of God is realized more in the concretization of justice and the building of a community of sisters and brothers than in the formalities of a symbolic celebration."<sup>1</sup> Whether we realize it or not, our worship together is a public witness and is public theology.

Worship is public witness because in just our collective presence together alone, we speak volumes about who we are and what are our values. The liturgical work we produce or are led together to produce is also a means of 'prophetic imagination' as Walter Brueggemann might encourage us to do. Together in weekly gatherings we proclaim what is and what is yet to come, and we share an order of the world to which we aspire to live in.<sup>2</sup>

It is public theology because the very order of the world that we proclaim to create through our worship, produces theological frameworks, concepts and understandings that in turn produce theological assertions about the nature of God and who we are in relationship to that God. It is our theology in the public square because the very order of the world that we proclaim to create through our worship, produces theological frameworks, concepts and understandings

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<sup>1</sup> Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (University of Texas: Harper & Row, 1988), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 68

that in turn produce theological assertions about the nature of God and who we are in relationship to that God. Claudio Carvalhaes in his breakthrough work in *Liturgies from Below* poses a great question as we engage in this work. He asks; “We must ask, in breaking the seals of Empire does our worship life subvert Empire?”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Carvalhaes defines “empire” with the analogy he brings forth from Rabbi Abraham Heschel who asserts that the worship that would take place at Mt. Sinai reflected the liberation of the Hebrew people from the Egyptian empire who enslaved and cut off the life for people. This worship would subvert the current order of things and overthrow the slavery mentality that so captivated their hearts and souls as well as their bodies. This “exodus” was not about people becoming free so that they could worship, instead it was about the power of worship to declare in resistance the freedom and liberation that God was bringing forth through the community. This was worship with attitude and purpose of the liberation kind. <sup>4</sup>

For both Heschel and Carvalhaes, Egypt continues to manifest itself all around us. In oppressive laws that discriminate and segregate and marginalize. The “golden calves” of idolatry that occupy our congregations continue to exist as we hold up standards of worship based on the supremacy of whiteness, European exceptionalism and patriarchy. Jesus’ entry into the world saw no distinction between the “empire” of Egypt and that of Rome. He makes it clear that his mission is the “set at liberty the oppressed and recovery of sight to the blind.” (Luke 4:18). Jesus also makes clear that as opposed to the thief, he has come to “bring life and life abundantly” (John 10:10). What was clear to Moses and Jesus must become mission critical for anyone interested in seriously continuing the work of liberation: Everything or any system that minimizes life or cuts off the ability for any person or group of people to thrive and reach their fullest potential is

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<sup>3</sup> Claudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 15

<sup>4</sup> Carvalhaes, *Below*, 16.

“empire” and must continue to be addressed in our public witness. This is particularly true for our worship experiences.

Over the centuries, empire—and by that I mean whiteness--has been able to manipulate our innate need for spiritual connection to impose its worldview on the masses and use own religion as a tool as opposed to an authentic connection with the Divine. The colonial expansion in the Americas--Spain from the south of Europe and England from the northeast—and brought with it a specific theological understanding and framework that required people to abandon their culture, traditions and their own spiritual heritage and understanding. This strategy included forcing people to adopt a Christian name at baptism and to disassociate with any “pagan” past whether from Africa, and/or from the First Peoples of North, Central and South America.<sup>5</sup> It also included a dismissal of people’s spiritual history, replacing it with a theology that endorsed “whiteness” as superior in all arenas as the dominating ideology.

If empire can get us to think that spiritual piety includes obedience and allegiance to its own rules and its leadership, then one must question how the rituals formed by the institution of the Church have shaped our understanding of our relationship to Empire. To be clear, I am not arguing that all the traditions and rituals of the church have been used for this purpose; there is ample evidence that the early rituals of the Christian community stood against Empire. One example of this is the ritual of baptism. In the early Church when it was still in its formation, baptismal candidates were asked to make a clear break from allegiance to Empire in its ritual, by declaring that Jesus was Lord in opposition to Caesar. In fact, early baptisms were often in secluded places, or underground to avoid being seen by Roman officials because they knew that it was seen as an act of treason against the state. It was considered a subversive act of treason.

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<sup>5</sup> Miguel de la Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002),39.



However, when Christianity became sanctioned and declared the religion of the state by Constantine, it wasn't long until the transition of it being used as a weapon of compliance, submission, and oppression. This led to one of the most brutal chapters in Christian history as forced baptism was used against Muslim and Jewish populations as well as indigenous populations around the globe. What was once meant as an act of liberation, resistance and new life, was now used as an act of conformity and a display of being part of the "saved" crowd. This history must make us consider seriously if what we've been handed down through the tradition of the institutional church has been shaped by colonialism as a means of propaganda for the ideology that promotes adherence to a socio-political-theological framework based on white supremacy. It's important to note that if not analyzed, uncovered, and dismantled the undercurrent of a colonized Christianity might very well continue to have an impact on our current Christian worshipping community today through the implicit and at times overt promotion of empire, whiteness, patriarchy and colonialism.

### **Definitions: Whiteness and Colonialism**

I've defined empire as: Everything or any system that minimizes life or cuts off the ability for any person or group of people to thrive and reach their fullest potential is "empire" and must continue to be addressed in our public witness. It is also important that I provide a working definition of what I am referring to as "whiteness" in the context of worship. When I refer to "whiteness" I am not just talking about the ethnic identity of a person who is of European descent. That is as true of an identity as any other ethnicity we hold as true across any society. When I refer to "whiteness" I mean the social construct that produced the idea behind white supremacy and how that very thought informs our ideas about sexuality, gender, economic status, and many of the other things we construct morays around. We know that the concept of race is a social construct, which means that the concept of "whiteness" is also a social construct

and one specifically used in the process of colonization, and exercising power over other ethnic groups. “Whiteness” includes skin color because part of the definition that supports white supremacy has to do with the biological identification of white skin. In an article published by Georgetown University Journal in 2018, journalist Nicholas Kristof observes that while individuals refer to “people of color in terms of their group individuality, [whites] insist on referring to ourselves individually, almost as if to suggest that we lacked a racial identity, or if that we possess one, it contains no relevance”.<sup>6</sup> Whites are permitted to exist outside of racial identity, even though non-whites are constantly assigned racial labels. In other words, to be white enables one to retain a sense of individuality, while structurally barring people of color from exercising that same right. Whiteness affords white-identified people the right to move in and out of their own ethnicity because the entire world is constructed around whiteness and the privilege that comes with it. Whiteness allows white people to see and measure the entire world through one’s eyes and use that vision to define the world. This ability to define the world centered around whiteness as majority is also visible in our understanding of religious concepts around God and spirituality.

Dr. Vicente Haya, from the University of Sevilla, Spain argues that the language that has been used to translate even Jesus’ words from Aramaic to the languages of conquest, namely Latin, French and eventually English are part of that systemic oppression and colonization. Latin was the language of the Roman oppressors and he finds it interesting that it must have been interesting for early Jewish Christians who might have been familiar with the everyday, Galilean Aramaic that Jesus spoke to hear his words translated in the language of power translate Jesus’ words especially after the adoption of Christianity by the Romans. It is not lost in this analysis that by using this language it helps solidify the power of Empire as the official gatekeepers of what the Christian movement would and would not allow or sanction especially as European

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<sup>6</sup> Anna Linder, “Defining Whiteness: Perspective on Privilege” *Georgetown University, 2018*

colonization began its conquest of the Americas and Africa and many parts of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Haya continues to argue that if we are able to decolonize Jesus and return him back to his Semitic universe and we recover his Aramaic language we will also be able to free Jesus from the religious categories we associate most with the process of colonization such as concepts of sin, mortification or humiliation, resignation or denial, fallen nature all of which have been used for over 2,000 years to besmirch the memory and presence of Jesus and give license to the crucifixion of thousands of people in his name throughout the centuries. His argument offers much for us to consider because if the languages used to translate the everyday Aramaic that Jesus and Jesus' contemporaries used is the language of power, then what does that say to us about our own understanding of these theological concepts we hold so close to our chest and are convinced are truth?

Take for example the very concept of salvation. In all the passages where the word is translated in the Gospels, the word in Aramaic is "life" but it is translated "salvation." (Luke 19:9, Matthew 18:11, John 12:47, John 5:34, Matt. 10:22 and 24:13, Mark 13:13, Matt 24:22, Mark 13:20, Mark 16:16, Luke 8:12 and finally without exception John 3:17. Even in one of the most famous passages where Jesus talks about his purpose in the world in Luke 9:56 it has been given to us in translated form in the King James as "For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." However, in the original Aramaic it reads, "For the Son of Man has not come to kill people but to give life." When we consider how much of an important tool of colonization and Empire building the word and definition of "salvation" had and continues to hold on a vast number of communities it is imperative to consider how this means of translation was more about conquest than spiritual and social renewal. Because it has implications that move us beyond the temporal life and gave license for empires such as the Spanish inquisition to implement all manner of

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<sup>7</sup> Vicente Haya, *Descolonizar a Jesucristo* (Ciudad de Mexico: Edicioneskasal, 2018)

brutal torture in the process of “bringing salvation”, salvation becomes a means to an end instead of a social-spiritual-political state of liberation and fullness of life as Jesus described in his mission statement. This same idea of “bringing salvation” is also the tool that fueled the impetus behind manifest destiny. White supremacy promoted the idea that just as God had chosen the Hebrew people and ordered them to conquer the cities and people in them, so to God has chosen the white race in North America to conquer, subdue and Christianize the native peoples. The Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny were both based on the idea that God had selected the white man to implement the plan of salvation for the savage thus sanctioning violence as a way of teaching white piety based on fear and the denial of the beauty of indigenous bodies as sacred. Whiteness as a system to measure all that is good and holy became the idea behind Indian schools across the country that were built on the missional idea that this would save the man and by getting rid of the Indian.<sup>8</sup>

As the Church continues to hold up this ideology it continues to be problematic to say the least, because it perpetuates the harmful, theological and liturgical trauma-imposed thousands of years ago even if now we are not burning people at the stake. Nevertheless, we are expelling people from the church, denying their God-given worth and dismissing marginal communities as “the mission field” and not the very center of the Gospel. The Church dismisses the spirituality of other people, we dismiss their experience of an incarnational Jesus who speaks their language and interprets salvation for themselves. Salvation not based on fake and conformist piety but on the liberation of all people from all forms of oppression that negates their human dignity and the right to experience life “and life more abundantly” (John 10:10).

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<sup>8</sup> Haya, “*Descolonizar*”, 56

## **Anti-Racist Work in Worship and becoming Pentecost People**

If we are to be intentional about developing congregations that are committed to being inclusive, anti-racist and egalitarian, the priority of this work must begin by deconstructing and reshaping our worship so that it reflects the transformative work of the Spirit. What would happen if we seriously endeavored to decenter whiteness, patriarchy, empire and colonialism from our Christian worship and liturgy? How would this work impact our public witness/theology that is inherent in our weekly worship experience? I believe that we can begin to answer these questions and we can start by considering one of the seasons of the Christian calendar that seems to connect to a holy call from God to the kind of community that reflects the dream and desire of God for all of creation; the Pentecost season.

Unlike what most of us have been trained to think in Christian circles, the story of Pentecost doesn't begin with Acts 2, it actually begins with the original celebration of Pentecost, Shavout which commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The story of the Israelites after Egypt has them arriving at Mt. Sinai fifty days after leaving Egypt. This leads them to the festival of Weeks (Pentecost) which came to commemorate the giving of the law. Originally, before the exile the festival was most associated with the harvest season. Filipino theologian, Helen Graham reminds us that this festival is associated with the wheat harvest festival of Israel, an important observation, especially given the struggles of ancient Israelite farmers during a rain-dependent agriculture. However, after the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 C.E. this festival as it was originally celebrated was no longer viable because the temple was no longer. This festival which was centered around harvest was then forever linked to the covenant of Mount Sinai and became known as the celebration of the giving of the Torah.<sup>9</sup>

The giving of the Torah is significant in the celebration of Pentecost and for our analysis. In Exodus 19, the people finally arrive at Mt. Sinai and they are preparing

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<sup>9</sup> John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Return to Babel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

themselves to begin to receive not a set of commands but rather a ratification from God helping them understand who they are and what relationship they would be entering with the God who had just liberated them and who they call Yahweh. What God brings to the people is, yet another iteration of the dream God established at creation. This was God walking through the garden yet again trying to find out where humanity is and with the hopes that no longer fear and shame cause God's people to hide away from God but rather enter into a loving and holy covenant.

This covenant was not just about God and the people, but all of the Torah has implications for community living. The Ten Commandments that we are familiar with plus the 613 codes and remaining laws have much to say about community life and as the Hebrew people that have now been gathered are to be called one people, worshipping one God. We should note that although Sinai serves as the geographical focal point for the giving of the laws in the Torah, they also reflect the changing circumstances, geographical, political and social landscape of the Hebrew people. In other words, the Hebrew people gathered at Mt. Sinai did not fall out of the sky one day. They were a collection of their individual and collective journeys from many parts of that region and their collective journey toward freedom.

We should be clear that the majority of the body of laws are instructions on how to carry out the first two commandments of loving God and what that relationship requires. It is interesting then to note that the way God most clearly expresses how the people should display that is by the ethical way they should treat neighbors. Likewise, the holiness codes found in Leviticus help us understand the relationship of the priest to the people and to God, and their role in how people are given equal access to commune with God. It was the priest and those set apart that helped the community deal with health concerns around how to handle blood to how to handle family relationships all to maintain the social solidarity of the community. This is especially seen in the regulations

around the jubilee year and the reparations implicated for people who might have had land taken away due to debt or even made indentured slaves because of it. The ongoing debate and use of these holiness laws to condemn same-sex relationships in our current understanding need to be taken within the entire context of a new community being brought together. All of the people gathered at Mt. Sinai are not one homogenous group of people but rather they have come themselves from different iterations of wilderness wandering and interacting with different communities who landed in Egypt under the same oppressive regime, that is why Moses and God spend such a significant time answer the question “who shall I say that has sent me?” The need to give instructions on how to handle menstruation, diets, and sexual relationships might have to do more with ensuring that this community would respect the human dignity of all people and to refrain from using their neighbor as property for any desire but rather to promote healthy human relationships whether it be same sex or otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

If holiness is the basic theme of the laws given in Leviticus, then unity is the theme given in Deuteronomy. It emphasizes the very reason why God called the people to worship at Sinai. It was to set aside a people different than the other warring nations, although there is much to argue that the Hebrew people learned well from their neighbors and engaged in war and hostile takeovers themselves. However, even within the text there is a struggle between God’s idea of a people and the people’s idea of who they should be. The text itself is full of this constant struggle and seems to contradict itself as we observe class and ethnic struggles of the liberation narrative of Exodus and the tug of war between books like Judges and Joshua. As Laurel A. Dykstra reminds us in her book *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* it is important and even liberating to note that even in these narratives that seem to promote invasion and genocide, there are narratives of particularly marginalized people like women and those described as prostitutes

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<sup>10</sup> Laurel A. Dykstra, “*Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus*” (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

that continue to show up in the formational narrative of a people called by God.<sup>11</sup>

Creating a covenant would not have been unusual, in fact many ancient people of that time would enter into covenant with their sovereigns, yet what makes this covenant different is that if you notice deep within the decalogue this is about community relationship more than it is about obedience to a list of commands. Only two of the commandments are positive in nature; the Sabbath and the commandment that refers to parents. The other eight are prohibitive but they are prohibitive because of what it means for the community. Although they seem to be written for just the individual, they address the health and well-being of the entire community. They provide basic instructions, a starting place for what Dr. King called “the beloved community.”<sup>12</sup> The other interesting component of these covenant details is that although some of the commandments seem to be simple and with few words, they are expansive and continue to cover many areas that even today we continue to interpret and apply for what it means for us to live in community. A commandment as simple as “thou shalt not kill” on its face is straight forward enough, yet we continue to consider the implications of this commandment when it comes to death row, mass incarceration, children at the border, state sponsored death including war and so on.

Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks celebrates this covenanting moment and is a reminder that a covenant binds us not only with God but with each other. This holiday also celebrates the harvest of the wheat, which has been an important symbol of provision and continues to be used to refer to the Word of God even in the New Testament in the celebration of the Eucharist. All of these symbols of both the given of the Torah and the provision of God, the covenant that binds the community together led to this celebration that identifies and defines this community. Into this scene comes what we know as the birth of the Church.

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<sup>11</sup> Dykstra, *Free*, 147.

<sup>12</sup> “Beloved Community” [wearethebelovedcommunity.org](http://wearethebelovedcommunity.org), 2008



We have often heard the very familiar theme associated with Pentecost and the birth of the Church is that Pentecost was a reversal of what occurred at Babel and the giving of the multiple tongues to confuse the people and to cause them to become fragmented. This particular exegesis of this passage in Genesis always confused and angered me because on its face it makes God seem petty, jealous and protective of God's power enough to use languages as a form of punishment and as a way of "scattering them over the face of the earth." (Genesis 11: 1-9).

However, this is not the case. What if the story of Babel is more about how people and nation states used building projects to centralize power that ultimately created caste systems where those with power were on top and everyone under them served their needs and that was the order of things? We know from archeological research that the Tower of Babel was most likely a Mesopotamian ziggurat, with a process and order as to how and who had access to the top. For example, the ziggurat of Ur had three social classes for every level; the rich, like government officials, priests, and soldiers, were at the top. The second level was for merchants, teachers, laborers, farmers and craft makers. The bottom level was for slaves captured in battle. What God did at Babel was not to divide a community but to level it! What God was securing was not God's power but the people's power! Through the different languages God was in fact giving people a voice, the language of difference, rebuttal and even protest so that not one people had the power but that they all had access to think, express and even to walk away from oppressive ideas like building a tower based on caste systems.

If we can see this about the account of Babel, then the experience of tongues of fire and a diversity of languages that we find in Acts 2 is indeed a call back to the Sinai and the liberating purpose of God to make of us a community. The power of the Spirit reminds us that resistance comes in multiple languages that can differ, can debate, and provide a diverse perspective at life. The gift of the Spirit is actually affirms the diverse, multilingual, multicultural, beyond gender nature of God. Perhaps the gift given at Pentecost is not just the birth of the Church, but the

rebirth of creation and the second giving of the Law/Commandment at Mt. Sinai. This time the gift exploded out to include the entire world as part of this new covenant and it is indeed the Church that is given the task to be a part of this process along with all of creation.

In terms of a multiplicity of languages there is precedent for this thought in Rabbinic studies and in midrash. There is a tradition in the Tiferet Yisrael, that tell us that when God spoke at Mount Sinai, the commandments split into seven parts and then again split into 70 parts into 70 languages of 70 nations. This way all of Israel, not just those gathered at Mt. Sinai heard the commandments. Of course, in Jewish tradition the number seven represents totality and completeness. The splitting of the Torah into 70 languages with its distinct nuance and interpretation gives way to why the Commandments and the Torah itself is considered a living breathing thing that constantly evolves and changes. Would those early Christians in the Church, when listening to the account of Pentecost, recognize the reference to the giving of the Law and the multiple languages that law might have been given? I believe that along with the tongues of fire that they heard described, they were also transported to that Torah moment at Mt. Sinai.<sup>13</sup>

As Pentecost exploded on the scene in the book of Acts, perhaps the implication is that God's desire is to bring us back to the covenant, back to the gathering in Mt. Sinai and back to community with all its responsibilities and opportunities is at the core of the work of the Church and central motif in worship. Pentecost seen in that light is an opportunity to recalibrate and re-create with God a community that has as its core value the very nature of God in all its diversity and multicultural reality. The primary work of the Church at its core is the public witness of this understanding of the nature of God in all we do, but in particular when we gather to celebrate God's presence in the world. How we make that presence known in the world through our symbols, our rituals, our images, our art, music and design of worship has to have at its central theme the liberative and multifaceted ways in which God comes to us. God comes to us free from

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<sup>13</sup> Carl Volz, "Pentecost: The Day of the Lord" *St. Paul Journal*, 1990.

the false narrative of whiteness, patriarchy and colonialism. We must endeavor to do the work of de-colonizing God so that the Spirit is free to transform all of us.

The work and life of Jesus Christ is centered around liberation and power. A liberated Church is *only* liberated by what Jesus has taught us through his own life example and his earthly ministry. According to Jürgen Moltmann, “The church exists if, and to the extent to which, men [sic] are obedient to the rule of the Servant of God and receive their liberation from his self-giving.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, when the Church ceases to follow its liberative mandate and example of Jesus, it loses its purpose and reason for existence. Furthermore, if the Church is co-opted to promulgate the message of whiteness as a system of domination by which all things are measured, and American exceptionalism, the idea that America and in particular North America is exceptional above other nations as in manifest destiny; and the misogynistic patriarchal system the church tends to operate by it becomes not only non-existent for the purposes of kingdom building, but indeed stands in direct opposition of it. This has never been truer than what we all witnessed this past January 6th at the capitol building. People carrying Bibles, flags emblazoned with crosses, and even a priest blessing and praying with the criminal activities taking place clearly implying that this insurrection was promoted and sanctioned by the Christian Church.

The racial, class and gender divides that control our society, our laws, our way of being are the very things that the Church is called to crush and instead hold up the sacred image of God in every human and all of creation as the guiding way of community. The events of Pentecost remind and recall us back to this work as the community loved by God and liberated through Jesus. Leonardo Boff stated, “In the spirit of Jesus, true worship of God is realized more in the concretization of justice and the building of a community of sisters and brothers than in the formalities of a symbolic celebration.”<sup>15</sup> Our symbolic celebrations, our rituals and traditions

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<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church and The Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993)

<sup>15</sup> Boff, *Poor*, 130.

must move us to see the justice dream of God. It must make us see our part in the work of salvation in its truest sense—life.

When these “formalities” are wrapped in colonialism, patriarchy and whiteness as defined earlier in this dissertation, it becomes idol worship. We engage in debates around where to place the historic Bible given to the church by a wealthy family then what to do with the living Word of God and how we live it out. We surround ourselves with white Jesus’ and themes of domination, military marches and we use our liturgy to measure our power as though we are engaging in ‘locker room talk’ instead of the gender-fluid language we can discover in scripture itself. If we can engage in the work of confronting this through our liturgical work together, we might be able make our worship encounters much more incarnational in that it takes on the reality of the communities we serve. We can courageously and lovingly challenge our congregations into transformation as we stand in solidarity with our neighbor as ourselves.

The message of a brown Palestinian Jew has been so co-opted by a white colonial institution known as the church that it has failed to dismantle this dysfunctional aberration of the gospel message of Jesus, and it is clear that a need for real repentance is a necessary first step as we move forward. Repentance needs to be followed by a recommitment to remove the trappings of empire from our liturgical practices, to confront whiteness as we imagine the work of the people and reclaim the prophetic liberative work of decentering whiteness in our Christian worship. By decentering, I am meaning that we disempower whiteness as a social construct and from its primary place by which we measure all things. We have used white superiority and in the case of the liturgy of the church, European superiority to measure all the things that we do and all the rituals we create. Our work then is to remove this ideology from the central point and lens. By this means we provide a much-needed shared space and even a prioritizing of poor, marginalized and indigenous voices long ignored and thus claim our prophetic public witness.

## **DeCenter: The Pentecost Challenge Project**

The scope of this digital project is an attempt to help congregations do the work we have been discussing. DeCenter: *The Pentecost Challenge* is an open digital platform. That continues to evolve just as worship and liturgy continues to be created. The intention is to continue to explore the many ways in which our communities from the underside of society continue to challenge our concepts of God and continue to create new rituals and revise old ones to incarnate their sufferings and joys so that we can all continue to move on to perfection.

### **Projection Description:**

Project goal: To create a digital platform that provides a library of liturgical and worship resources for the whole church that pulls from primarily the Latinx and the experience of multicultural/bicultural, cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry and settings. This resource shall be Christ-centered, emerging, contextual, relevant, and centered in liberation theology and social justice to enhance the worship experience of multicultural, bilingual/bicultural worship experiences as well as new, and strengthen the public worship witness of the body of Christ.

### **Service Description/Audience:**

This platform will serve clergy, laity, worship leaders, lay missionaries, and new church start planters in their work designing worship experiences, public witnesses, and (in) the development of worship and liturgy teams in their local settings. The mission is to provide a variety of worship resources, including music that is bilingual/bicultural and can serve in cross racial/cross cultural backgrounds and multicultural ones. It will include liturgical movements such as; simple prayers, eucharist liturgical settings, baptismal liturgies and renewals, spoken word, etc.

Most importantly, this platform will serve as a resource for leaders and congregations in

their prophetic work as public witnesses such as rallies, public actions, public prayers, and vigils. It can also include sermon starters or ideas for sermons as part of the worship experience, especially if looking to enhance a particular theme in worship. This platform should carry the resources in downloadable files with the appropriate copyright information and permissions to attribute the work to the artists/composers and writers. Music should be available in the lead and chords sheets and lyrics only for easy slide creation and with learning track/sing-a-long track for easy access.

**Template Example:**

*Scripture Focus:* Can either be one scripture or several scriptural passages that align for the theme from the Christian calendar.

*Central Theme:* General motif of the worship experience is given here, along with examples of where we find these themes in the scripture passage.

*Decentering moments:* Highlight of places within the text/or liturgical practice where we can change the hermeneutics to decenter whiteness and bring a much more liberative lens to the text or liturgical movement.

*Preaching theme or themes:* Here we are invited to choose either one or two of the scriptures of the liturgical calendar to exegete and open up some preaching starters with an emphasis to decenter whiteness.

*Music Resources:* Provide resources that can be both original and from communities that are not often featured in worship material. Can be published material as well, especially if the material comes from resources that are often not used in mainline Christian worship.

Prayers, Liturgies, Calls to Worship, etc.: Anything that helps the congregation pray or respond

that is intentional about engaging in anti-racism, anti-colonial and antipatriarchal. These can be original pieces or can be pieces collected from communities that are underserved and have often not been given a space to be included in our liturgical practices. i.e., indigenous communities, younger people of color, prison and/or detained communities.

**See more project resources at: [www.decenterworship.com](http://www.decenterworship.com)**

### **Conclusion and Beginning**

Recently, the conversation of critical race theory in this country recently has been the subject of both challenge and opportunity. Challenge to a country that continues to skirt and skate past real confrontation and truth telling. Opportunity because even amid of what might feel like the pain of surgery, the opening of wounds often covered up is the only way true healing and restoration can begin. The work of dismantling and decentering whiteness in Christian worship is no less of a challenge and opportunity.

For some, this work will seem to shake the very foundation to which their faith has been formed, or as if we are disrespecting and disqualifying the work of so many who have worked to create a faithful and true worshipping community called the Church. To be fair, it was earth shattering for me to confront the narrative I had created by a system that made me believe that God saw me as less as a woman and as a person of color. The image most clear in my mind was Charleston Heston as God. He was large, condemning and always watching to see where next I would fail to come down with a bolt of lightning to punish me. The image was that my body, my genitals, my desires, my sexuality even at the age of twelve when I had my first menstrual cycle, made me unclean and unworthy.

The way I came to this conclusion wasn't just because I heard it from the pulpit, but I received it in the words of the corporate prayers in the congregation, the music and hymns filled

with piteous lyrics of denial and surrender and the constant check from deacons and elders around me about my demeanor, my behavior and even the length of my skirts. Everything dysfunctional I learned about my body, I learned it from church, in worship on Sunday mornings. I received my purpose and marching orders from a theology based on a God who saw my worth only through my ability to marry and conceive children. As I began to study more and dismantle the theology given to me, the message I received was that I was being spoiled or damaged by the elite and institutions that no longer believed in the truth about God. Much like what we have recently heard from the governors of Florida and Texas as they begin to try to police what college students are receiving, like critical race theory.

What I discovered is that even as I began to break down the images that I had received and in essence lose *God*, it was during this process that I found God perhaps for the very first time. I discovered the beauty of many of the ancient ones I consider to be important to my discovery, people who were dismantling the obstacles and limitations that patriarchy and empire were putting on them during their time. These heroes like the beautiful mysticism of Julian of Norwich, the wisdom of Sol Juana Ines de la Cruz, the passion of St. John of the Cross and so many others, were all decentering and challenging the forces and powers of their day to change the narrative that women could not be theologians, or that the sensuality of the body cannot be a part of our spiritual experience.

Engaging in this work is a continuation of what people like Juana Ines de la Cruz, a 17<sup>th</sup> century nun who was self-taught and who became one of the first women to write and teach theology formally and who during that period dared to challenge the narrative that women were to blame for the fall of man and to question the notion of original sin in the first place. Not only was she self- taught, but she was a mestiza--half indigenous and Spanish and fully Mexican. That identity was what she used to incarnate Christ to an indigenous reality and advocacy that she engaged in during her time. Her passion to study more even in the face of opposition is the stuff



of legends and in her simple defense “I don’t study to know more, but to ignore less,” has been a template for many theologians who stand outside of the norm regardless of gender.

As faith leaders and people who provide spiritual formation, this is the work of our lives. In many ways we are doing critical race theory work as we break down the history, narrative and images shaped by colonialism, whiteness, and patriarchy. By doing this our worship is free to become a living breathing public witness in the public square liberating the church to follow the flow of the Pentecost spirit and transform the world. *Ru’ach!*

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