



The Case for Positive Entanglements with the Colonial Past: Singapore as Locus Theologicus of Contextual Theology

ABSTRACT

The importance of “context” in theological exploration has been solidly affirmed through disciplines such as contextual theology and intercultural theology.¹ These disciplines stressed that it is impractical to establish a one-size-fits-all narrative in the search for God-talk. Inspired by this idea, this paper attempts to provide a fresh optic into postcolonial theology by introducing Singapore as a Locus Theologicus. The insights of Singapore’s contextual theology can offer an alternative vision into understanding the relationship, power dynamics, and theological discourse between a locality and its colonizer. Ultimately, this invites the consideration for a new paradigm to harvest positive entanglements with a colonial past, which could eventually facilitate a journey from lamentation to hope.

¹ For a summarized understanding of the growing importance of context within theological exploration, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology, Faith and Cultures Series* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 3–15; Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity After the Cultural Turn, Research in Contemporary Religion*, vol. 25 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 9–47.

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial theology has surfaced and gained significance over the past few decades as the framework to reflect on the trauma, hurts and exploitation between a locality and its previous colonizer(s). The theology calls for a critical view of the multi-faceted impositions and oppressions of the colonizers and explores paradigms to dislodge the control and grip of the colonial West on all aspects of the liberated countries. Furthermore, it also raises the reflection on the imbalanced power dynamics, even in the realm and scope of theological methodology. The entanglements between the colonizer vis à vis colonized thus have typically been viewed negatively. Unique as it may be, Singapore, a small island that became an independent country, only started its search for a national identity after the withdrawal of the colonial power, and does not seem to display the trauma of its colonial past. In fact, the country utilized the entanglement with its past as the strategic element to propel the nation to astonishing economic and social development within a short frame of time. This paper aims to first investigate this reality, and then question if there is in fact a possibility for a so-called *positive entanglement* between a locality and the colonizer(s).

SINGAPORE AND ITS COLONIAL PAST

Singapore is a country that has seen its fair share of historical development. Being a small island located at the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia, it experienced colonial power when Malaya was colonized by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch in the

seventeenth century. However, the island itself began to be populated by colonial forces in the early nineteenth century, when the British arrived and swiftly realized the strategic importance of the place for commerce and trade.² Except for a short period of time when Singapore fell under the occupation of the Japanese Empire during World War II, the island was ruled by the British for one hundred and forty-four years until it gained its independence in 1963.³

As a small island country with no natural resources to rely on, the government needed to make calculated and discerned decisions to develop the country. Instead of attempting to detach from the colonial past, the leaders, especially in the person of prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, decided to utilize elements from the British rule to progress the nation. This included the emphasis on the English language and the establishment of a governing system that drew inspiration from the colonial rule. Such decisions managed to propel the country to tremendous economic and social growth within a short span of time.⁴ Many sociologists, studying the development of Singapore, commented that the way the country evolved with such rapidity is partly due to the leadership and government utilizing hegemonic and epistemological control over the people, unlike that of the colonial powers.⁵ While this

² For a detailed account of the colonial history of Singapore, See Jean E. Abshire, *The History of Singapore, The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011).

³ Singapore gained its independence from British rule in 1963 and became part of Malaya. However, due to internal political tension, Singapore was removed as a state of Malaya and become an independent country in 1965.

⁴ For a more detailed account of the economic growth of Singapore, see W.G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵ As an example, sociologist Christopher Tremewan argues that the educational system that was developed after Singapore's independence was a way to exert hegemonic

statement contains some factual merits, in order to fully appreciate the reality from the paradigm of contextual theology, one would need to raise the question: *who is the subject of theologizing in this scenario?* Taking an observer's view in analysing Singapore's reality, issues such as power differences and the perpetuation of colonial epistemological violence will surface. However, if the theology were to be birthed from the local culture itself, then the central question will have to be: *what is the experience from a Singaporean's perspective?*

SINGAPORE CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

In his seminal book “Models of Contextual Theology”, theologian Stephen Bevans elucidated that culture is not a static concept but a dynamic, constantly growing reality that communicates meaning through symbolic form.⁶ Taking this understanding as a starting point for this paper's proposed idea, one would need to reflect on *how did the Singapore culture take shape?* As the island only gained full independence in 1965, do we claim that its culture only began from this point onwards?

Sociologist Selvaraj Velayutham, analysing the Singapore context, argues at the get-go that the

control over the people. In his own words, Tremewan comments, “As early as December 1966 the Ministry of Education began to plan a comprehensive programme for moral education and social discipline. From 1972 the learning of the mother-tongue was promoted as reinforcing traditional Asian values. The latter appeared to be the PAP-state's answer to questions of morals and discipline. While English was necessary for economic success, the mother tongue, according to Lee Kuan Yew, was necessary for 'the ethics, values of work and discipline in an orderly society'. In this way the mother-tongue emphasis was used as a political prophylactic.” See Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore, St Antony's Series* (NY: St Martin's Press, 2016), 91.

⁶ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 16-27.

“conception of nation” was not something that occurs only “when the national borders are fixed and delineated”.⁷ This implies that “identity”, or in the same manner “culture”, is fluid and organic, and requires attention to what happened in the “in-between spaces”.⁸ From this perspective, the locality of Singapore (or in that respect, any locality) does not have a “pure” identity or culture at any given time. Local culture will have to encompass all the past and present reality that produces symbolic meaning. The colonial past of Singapore, therefore, cannot be denied as part of the cultural element and identity formation.

What makes Singapore unique thought, is that due to the manner the government has developed and shaped the society upon its independence, Singaporeans are not, or very minimally, impacted by the trauma or oppression of the colonial past. Conversely, because of the government’s choice in shaping the nation, most Singaporeans will express that their impression of the entanglements with this past is generally positive. One can therefore argue that Singapore is a nation that, being aware of the epistemological hold of the Western colonial hegemony,

⁷ Selvaraj Velayutham, “The Making of the Singapore Nation-State and the Quest for a National Identity,” in *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2007), 20.

⁸ Velayutham further explains this concept stating, “I argue that the conception of the nation, as something that is achieved when the national borders are fixed and delineated, is ultimately flawed. Nations such as Singapore are historically and spatially always-already connected with elsewhere, and are therefore never self-contained nor self-sufficient.” See *ibid.* Theologian Catherine Keller also reflects on the concept of identity while explaining the development of postcolonial theology, she states “for identity is not here a fixed set of traits, but rather evolves through a continuing process of interrelation, identification, and differentiation. A person’s identity is formed as she or he negotiates a sense of belonging to some groups and being distanced from others.” As such, she concludes that the task of postcolonial theology is to pay attention and analyse what happens in the “in-between places”. See Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, ed. *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 12–15.

decided to —instead of forceful resistance— choose an approach of embrace, and thus establishing elements of positive entanglement with the colonial past. This choice is clearly not made out of magnanimity, but a calculated discernment for the betterment of the nation. From an outsider’s perspective, this could be seen as a new form of a hegemonic move of the government. Nevertheless, what is important here is the perspective of an insider (as the *subject* of theologizing). Singapore’s local sociologists and historians have reflected on this matter over the decades. While there is the admission that, like other colonies, Singapore’s past contained elements of colonial oppression and hegemony, many believe that the nation can harvest more positive elements than negative ones from the colonial entanglements. Tommy Koh, a famed Singapore law professor and previous representative to the United Nation, opines that “the British did leave us with a positive legacy. [...] I described British rule as 60 percent good and 40 percent bad. The good things are well known”,⁹ and that

“Many PAP leaders argue that British rule, for all its flaws, laid the foundations for the city-state’s remarkable economic success today. They also believe some former British colonies squandered the legacy left to them by their erstwhile rulers, rather than building and improving on it, as Singapore has.”¹⁰

⁹ Tommy Koh, “Tommy Koh: My birthday Wishes for Singapore,” *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 6 August, 2019.

¹⁰ Dzedzic Stephen, “Singapore’s Quarrel Over Colonialism,” *The Interpreter*, 20 February, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/singapore-s-quarrel-over-colonialism>. [accessed December 11, 2022].

This goes to show that the perception of “positive entanglements” with the colonial past is but a cultural reality in Singapore, one which is willing to embrace the optimistic sentiment while downplaying the sense of oppression and trauma.¹¹

POSITIVE ENTANGLEMENT AND ITS THEOLOGICAL REASONING

As one dwells deeper into the reality of Singapore and its relation to the colonial past, further questions will arise:

- *Can this entanglement in Singapore’s reality truly be termed “positive”?*
- *What are the theological implications of understanding postcolonial relationships in this manner?*

The first question warns against the danger of an oversimplified understanding of reality, and a naiveté in the complexity raised in the colonizer–colonized relationship. In defending the proposed position, one would need to be made aware that such an approach does not belittle important issues such as power dynamics and liberation in the postcolonial discourse. However, the proposal aims to

¹¹ The author is aware that the proposed perspective in this paper has a certain semblance to concepts such as *hybridity, mimicry, liminality and third-space* proposed by Homi Bhabha. However, the author believes that the proposed idea from the Singapore context still provides a fresh perspective, especially in the reflection of *theological subject*. For a succinct summary of postcolonial concepts proposed by Bhabha, see Danny Franklin Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations in Contemporary Theology,” *Hapág: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 3, no. 1 (2006): 29–33.

highlight a foundational claim of contextual theology: that the *locus* of theology is within each culture, and thus the *uniqueness of every culture needs to be respected*. As the *subject*, if the current generation of Singaporeans intuit that the country's entanglement with the colonial past contains positive elements, then the foundation of contextual theology itself calls for respect and attention given to such a view. Theologian Namsoon Kang, in reflecting on the issue of the "theological subject", especially from an Asian perspective, warns against Asian theology falling into the trap of Orientalism resulting in the danger of the complete denial of Western contributions.¹² Such a "trap" creates once again a "we-they" binary discourse that neither accurately respects the Asian culture nor the colonial past. What Kang aims to highlight in her reflection is that it is erroneous to speak of an encompassing "Asian theology", for each Asian country contains its own unique reality, history, and colonial entanglements. Therefore, sound theology can only emerge through respecting the theological subject and its unique culture and context. Such an argument, thus, corroborates the understanding that from a Singapore context, one can truly establish "positive entanglements".

¹² In her own words, Kang explains, "The critique of Western epistemic hegemony by Asian theologians aims to undermine the Orientalist dogma. In this process, Asian theologians claim Asian superiority and deny universal validity of Western culture and knowledge.[...] In this claim, there is a strong we-they binarism of we-Asian and they-Western, and it does not accurately reflect how different and diverse the Asian cultures are. As the West as a homogeneous whole exists only in imagination, Asia as a homogeneous whole exists only in the imagination. When one dichotomizes Asia-West into we-they contrasts, one then essentializes the resultant other." See Namsoon Kang, "Who/What is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 101-04.

While postcolonial theology often attempts to tackle the issue of colonial power play, the “positive entanglement” of the Singapore context turns the attention to the possibility of accepting this power reality as part of one’s culture. In short, this proposal has the potential to re-problematise and destabilize the postcolonial discourse that sets out to destabilize established discourses in the first place.¹³

As to the second question, an affirmation that “positive entanglements with colonial past is a possibility” can be substantiated with sound theological backing. Such backing would require one to ask a fundamental question: *what is the purpose of theology?* While this question opens a plethora of further reflections, a most succinct response would be *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). However, the “understanding” implied in this case is always aimed towards a deeper discovery of God in human reality. In this regard, biblical scholar Reimund Bieringer has proposed a method of “normativity of the future”, using scripture as an “in-breaking of God into the world”, and to be in search of “God’s vision or dream for the world”.¹⁴ Bieringer believes that such an approach

¹³ Daniel Franklin Pilario wrote a wonderful summary text explaining the development and aims of postcolonial theology. In summary, he describes postcolonial theology as theology that destabilizes hegemonic discourse while at the same time containing “struggles that intend to undo the effect of colonization within theological discourse.” See Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations in Contemporary Theology,” 39. I would thus like to highlight that “undoing the effect of colonization” might face the danger of becoming a new hegemonic discourse, and the “positive entanglement” proposed will challenge and destabilize such a discourse.

¹⁴ Reimund Bieringer, “Texts that Create a Future: The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today,” in *Patristic Social Ethics: Issues and Challenges (CUA Studies in Early Christianity)*, ed. Johnan Leemans, Brian Matz, and Johan Verstraeten (Washington DC: University of America Press, 2011), 21. For a more detailed exposition of the concept of “Normativity of the Future”, see Reimund Bieringer et al., *Normativity of*

facilitates biblical reflection to always keep the focal point in the discovery of God's presence in each human reality. While this concept was first developed as a method for scriptural reflection, the theological foundation of the method could be expanded into all fields of theology, for, the heart and aim of all theological endeavours should lie in bringing one closer to the vision of God. The proposal to look for "positive entanglements" sets off with such a vision in mind. In doing so, postcolonial theology can possibly venture into a direction that, while being aware of all the complex realities that colonialism brings with it, facilitates the search for a "normativity of the future" within a postcolonial context. This will allow for a greater alignment with the call of theology to "seek the face of God" in our reality, by encouraging elements of reconciliation and hope.¹⁵

(IN)CONCLUSION: A GLIMMER OF HOPE

The attempt to propose a "positive entanglement" with the colonial past within the Singapore context should not and could not have a conclusion. The proposal, at its core, is meant to attempt an alternative view to invite further reflections and conversations. Taken as a starting point, this view destabilizes postcolonial discourse and

the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective, Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia 61 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

¹⁵ Without neglecting matters such as power dynamics, oppression and liberation, the attempt to search for "positive entanglements" challenges the colonized party to consider a paradigm which believes that amidst a complex and difficult past reality, there exist ways to harvest something good. Therefore, the approach focuses on the call to reconciliation between the colonizer-colonized. Such an approach also hinges on the notion that theological works facilitate a journey towards hope and the continuous search for a realization of the vision of God amidst our complex human reality.

challenges all to endeavour a fresh look into colonial entanglements. Some of the new exploratory questions include:

- Can one possibly harvest “positive entanglements” within localities that experience greater oppression and trauma: E.g. India, Africa, etc.?
- Can this approach help to reduce the “victimization mentality” within the postcolonial discourse?¹⁶
- How will this approach reshape concepts of power, hegemony, and epistemology?
- How do we deal with the issue of liberation, when there are obvious differences in views from an observer and the “theological subject”?

While this is but a budding theological musing, it is a sincere hope that the venture stimulates reflections on concepts such as liberation and power discourse. Ultimately, it aims to facilitate a smoother journey from lamentation to hope for every subject entangled in the web of colonialism.

¹⁶ Pilario, in summarizing postcolonial theology, states that one of the aims consists in “hermeneutics of resistance”, of which the subaltern subverts the dominating power by highlighting “how the invaded, often caricatured as abused victims or grateful beneficiaries, transcended these images and wrested interpretation from the invaders, starting processes of self-discovery, appropriation and subversion.” *See* Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations in Contemporary Theology,” 47-50. However, when this is not done in a balanced manner, the undertaking can end up becoming a process of mere lamentations and perpetuation of a sense of victimization. Therefore, continuous efforts need to be put in place to ensure that focus on liberation and emancipation remains intact.

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