



DECOLONIAL CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES

DESAFIOS DECOLONIAIS ÀS CIÊNCIAS DA RELIGIÃO

DESAFÍOS DECOLONIALES A LAS CIENCIAS DE LA RELIGIÓN

Frederico Pieper *

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora.

Programa de Pós-graduação em Ciência da Religião.

Juiz de Fora, MG, Brasil.

E-mail: fredericopieper@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0001-5590-2202](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5590-2202)

ABSTRACT

In recent times, an ideological critique of the main concepts of religious studies has been carried out. However, that same criticism is not made in relation to the very notion of science. Rather, these critiques reveal the close connection between religious studies and a conception of modernity and science. The purpose of this article is to show how the radicalization of this criticism through decolonial theories leads to openness to other epistemologies, which challenges some assumptions made in religious studies. The central question is: would opening up to other rationalities imply the dissolution of religious studies into many regional theologies? In other words, to what extent would the resistance to this decolonial radicalization through the affirmation of scientific and social approaches to religion, observed in certain trends in current religious studies, reveal a challenge brought by the decolonial theory to religious studies? To address this problem, this article is divided into three sections. In the first part, it points to the main features of what is understood as decolonial, adopting the thought of Walter Dignolo as a reference. In the second part, the article highlights the close connection between religious studies and modern epistemological values. Finally, the article raises some questions and implications that come from the decolonial turn toward the field of religious studies.

Keywords: Coloniality; Religious Studies; Theology; decolonial theories.

RESUMO

Recentemente, tem sido realizada a crítica ideológica aos principais conceitos das Ciências da Religião. Contudo, essa mesma crítica não é feita em relação à própria noção de ciência. Pelo contrário, estas críticas revelam a estreita ligação entre as Ciências da Religião e uma concepção de modernidade e de ciência. O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar como a radicalização desta crítica através de teorias decoloniais leva à abertura a outras epistemologias, o que desafia alguns pressupostos assumidos pelas Ciências da Religião. A questão central é: a abertura a outras racionalidades implicaria a dissolução das Ciências da Religião em várias teologias regionais? Por outras palavras, até que ponto a resistência a esta radicalização decolonial através da afirmação de abordagens científicas e sociais da religião, observada em certas tendências contemporâneas

* Doctorate and master's degree in Religious Studies from the Methodist University of São Paulo. Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of São Paulo.

das Ciências da Religião, revelaria um desafio trazido pelas teorias decoloniais às Ciências da Religião? Para encaminhar esse problema, este artigo está dividido em três seções. Na primeira parte, aponta as principais características do que se entende por decolonial, tomando como referência o pensamento de Walter Mignolo. Na segunda parte, o artigo destaca a estreita ligação entre as Ciências da Religião e os valores epistemológicos modernos. Finalmente, o artigo levanta algumas questões e implicações que advêm da viragem decolonial para as Ciências da Religião.

Palavras-chave: Colonialidade; Ciências da Religião; Teologia; Teorias Decoloniais.

RESUMEN

Recientemente se ha hecho una crítica ideológica a los principales conceptos de las Ciencias de la Religión. Sin embargo, esta misma crítica no se hace en relación con la noción de ciencia. Por el contrario, estas críticas revelan la estrecha conexión entre las Ciencias de la Religión y una concepción de la modernidad y de la ciencia. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar cómo la radicalización de esta crítica a través de teorías decoloniales conduce a la apertura a otras epistemologías, que cuestionan algunos supuestos asumidos por las Ciencias de la Religión. La pregunta central es: ¿la apertura a otras racionalidades implicaría la disolución de las Ciencias de la Religión en diferentes teologías regionales? En otras palabras, ¿hasta qué punto la resistencia a esta radicalización decolonial a través de la afirmación de enfoques científicos y sociales de la religión, observada en ciertas tendencias contemporáneas en las Ciencias Religiosas, revelaría un desafío traído por las teorías decoloniales a las Ciencias Religiosas? Para responder a esta pregunta, este artículo se divide en tres secciones. En la primera parte, señala las principales características de lo que se entiende por decolonial, tomando como referencia el pensamiento de Walter Mignolo. En la segunda parte, el artículo destaca la estrecha conexión entre las Ciencias de la Religión y los valores epistemológicos modernos. Finalmente, el artículo plantea algunas interrogantes e implicaciones que surgen del giro decolonial hacia las Ciencias de la Religión.

Palabras Clave: Colonialidad; Ciencias de la Religión; Teología; Teorías decoloniales.

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to debate the impacts of decolonial theories¹ on religious studies in Brazil. The consequences of these theories in different fields of knowledge cannot be ignored. These theories have impelled scholars to rethink some theoretical assumptions, concepts, and perspectives. However, within religious studies, there is a certain apathy or even disregard toward these theories (there are exceptions such Joy, 2001; Masuzawa, 2005; Geertz, 2013). In the past, this field of study was a pioneer (though not without some limitations) in the approach to non-Western religions and philosophies. However, in many ways, religious studies remain a modern science. Since 2000, there have been debates about the pertinence and even the colonality of certain Western categories, such as the sacred and religion (Smith, 1998; Fitzgerald, 2000; Arnal; McCutcheon, 2013). However, this

¹ The terms decolonial and postcolonial designate a set of proposals that come very close to their intentions, especially as they are epistemologies of the south. However, decolonial has been used in reference to the Latin American context, while postcolonial in African and Asian contexts. Therefore, despite their similarities, these terms differ as a result of the particular historical developments of each respective region.

deconstruction does not reach epistemological assumptions, such as the conception of science itself. This article intends to focus on this topic from a decolonial perspective.

Our task is to analyze how the epistemological propositions of decolonial theories challenge some fundamental principles of religious studies. In this case, I do not mean just concepts, methods, or theories. It seems to me that something even more important is at stake. Religious studies have emerged as a modern approach to religion that was possible by a conception of secularization, which placed religion as an object of study. When religious studies (in German, *Religionwissenschaft*) emerged as a field in the late nineteenth century, it distinguished itself from theology by the relation to its subject. I argue that decolonial theories profoundly affect this fundamental feature of religious studies.

To do this, the article is structured as follows. First, I characterize what is meant by *decolonial* in the context of this discussion. My intention is not to exhaust the subject but to highlight some philosophical features that will be useful for our purposes. I will adopt Walter Mignolo's ideas as a reference to define decolonial as a critique of the modernity/coloniality system from the margins. In the second part of the text, I develop the two central features of the religious studies perspective: the notion of impartiality and methodological agnosticism. The main purpose is to show how religious studies are attached to a modern concept of science. Again, I do not intend to give a complete account of religious studies but just highlight this dependence between an approach of religion and a certain conception of modernity. Finally, I would like to raise some questions in the dialogue between decolonial theories and religious studies, particularly concerning this notion of knowledge. In what sense does the radicalization of critique through decolonial theories lead to the dissolution of religious studies into theologies? If so, what are the limits and consequences of this?

2 MODERNITY/COLONIALITY AND DECOLONIAL CRITICISM

The history of several countries south of the equator is marked by struggles and resistance throughout time. Colonialism in modernity created a very peculiar configuration of power. Most former colonies were relegated to a hierarchically inferior place within the world system.² This situation has not changed with the processes of political independence and the beginning of these countries as nations. Notwithstanding this long history of exploitation and resistance since the sixteenth century, for this article, decoloniality will be confined to theories that emerged in the late twentieth century in a postmodern context.

² Achille Mbembe has called this as *non-places* or *third places* (Mbembe, 2019).

Politically, postmodernity coincides with the rise of the New World Order after the fall of the Berlin Wall. With those events, we no longer should use the expression, the *Third World*, but the *Global South*, as a name for this part of the world.

Given this recent history, in intellectual terms, post- and decolonial theories are the result of and belong to a set of critical elaborations of modernity. Although not limited to them, I understand that decolonial perspectives derive part of their theoretical support from deconstruction and poststructuralism (Morton, 2007, p. 161-172; Mignolo, 2000, p. 38). This linkage is important for understanding how decolonial theories build the critique of modernity underpinned by these trends. However, it is also important to consider how decolonial hermeneutics also go beyond deconstruction and poststructuralism. Let us examine these two points.

This critique of modernity must address a difficult question. Modernity is not only a chronological period of humankind history but also a way of thinking. One peculiar feature is that modernity is a self-certified period.³ Therefore, its distinctive feature is the critique; inclusive modernity makes its own critique and of its fundamentals. For this reason, the Mexican writer Octavio Paz makes the following considerations about the expression *modern tradition*: “The sentence implies more than a logical and linguistic contradiction: it expresses that dramatic condition of our civilization which seeks its foundation not in the past or in some immovable principle, but in changing” (Paz, 1991, p. 8). If critique is the main feature of modernity, then how is a real rupture with it possible? Put differently, since modernity is mainly a critique of itself, is every critical approach simply another movement inside of this paradigm?

To understand this aspect, it is important to consider the self-referential character of modernity. Another feature of modern discourse is the assimilation/exclusion of the other or any transcendence. It is organized in a pure immanence in a narcissistic *set of mirrors* (Pieper, 2023a). To avoid speculation and make this point clearer, some examples will be helpful. In philosophical thought, this can be identified in Kantian philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* aimed to establish the possibility of metaphysics by determining the extent and the limits of reason. However, Immanuel Kant warns the reader that the reason is its own judge. This means that reason must judge itself and its limits must be found from itself and not in extrinsic places or criteria. In his proposal, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is this

³ Jürgen Habermas notes: “Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch: *it has to create its normativity out of itself*. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape” (Habermas, 1987, p. 7).

court where reason is judged based on its own eternal laws (Kant, 1999, AXIII). The result is a peculiar court where reason is the legislator, judge, and defendant.⁴

This self-referentiality excludes any possibility of transcendence or any other. In doing so, it leads to nihilism. In his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's late philosophy, Martin Heidegger seeks to articulate two key concepts: the will to power and the eternal recurrence. The conflict here is that, on the one hand, the will to power points to the freedom of creative subjectivity. On the other hand, the eternal recurrence of the same indicates a kind of determinism in the incessant return of things. If one concept highlights freedom and the other determinism, then how can one reconcile these two opposing concepts? In his controversial interpretation, Heidegger understands that it is the nature of the will to power that expands itself. The will wants more power. In this expanding movement, there are moments of stabilization. However, after that, what does the will want? The will wants even more power. The eternal recurrence of the same happens, as this will revolves around itself. It wants more power for the sake of power itself. In this self-referenced game, the goal is lost. The will to power closes on itself in an eternal return of the will upon itself (Heidegger, 1997, p. 231). According to Heidegger, this absence of a goal is what can be recognized as a face of nihilism.

This process takes place with the overcoming of the other. In this modern schema, the other is either eliminated or reduced to sameness. In his analysis of the conquest of America, Tzvetan Todorov expresses a historical example of what may sound abstract here. When he exposes the relationship of the Dominican friar Bartolomeu de Las Casas, who stood in defense of the indigenous people, he asks, "Las Casas loves the Indigenous. And he is a Christian [...] Is it possible to really love someone by ignoring their identity, seeing instead a projection of himself or his ideals? [...] Is not there a risk of wanting to transform the other in the name of oneself?" (Todorov, 2011, p. 245). In this mirror set, dissonant postures tend to be reduced to the same. The other is reduced to mere projections of a *self*.

How then do we escape from this logic? Understood primarily from this self-referentiality, modernity finds itself in crisis when the system first recognizes itself as a

⁴ To not be limited to the philosophical discourse, one can find a similar example in the considerations on modern art made by leading critic Clement Greenberg: "I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist. The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence" (Greenberg, 1960, p. 101). This is especially strong in the abstract formalism. In this tendency, the self-referenced aspect appears through the concept of purity. Pure art presupposes the autonomy of art and affirms that art must be closed to itself. Here, art establishes its own self-criticism according to its own rules.

system. Reason assumes that it does not represent the natural order, but rather is an interpretation of the world. It provides a production and not the discovery of some structure of Being *out there*. In other words, there is the recognition of the situated and the interpretative character of this reason. There is movement from the inside out. It is similar to an implosion. This is not to say that there is a transition between paradigms, from modernity to postmodernity. Rather, it is the very notion of great explanatory paradigms that is called into question. This reason is not Reason, but a possibility among others that is based on a local narrative that is intended to be universal. In the words of Anibal Quijano:

Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that a specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnicity should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnicity is called Western Europe because this actually pretends to impose a provincialism as universalism (Quijano, 2007, p. 121).

Therefore, because modernity is a way of thinking constructed from a set of narratives that has the pretension of being the mirror of the structure of being, it also has wants to be universal. This metanarrative conceived the human being as endowed with a natural disposition to realize the potentialities of reason. Again, a most exemplary case is the thesis expounded by Kant in a writing piece, whose title says a lot: *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1991). As history is organized from the perspective of emancipation by means of reason, the future is the temporal dimension that gives direction to history. However, with the expansion of modernity and encounters with other rationalities that do not let themselves be reduced to the Reason, it was given the conditions for the recognition of the limits of the modern narrative. Modernity had to admit that many local narratives cannot be reduced to a single guiding axis of all human history (Vattimo, 1992). More than a mirror of reality, modernity and its knowledge were no more than a local narrative that was believed to have an absolute meaning.

Related to this more epistemic dimension, there are also political reasons that have put this universalism in check: universalism was used many times as justification for ideological and political management. Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) has indicated that in modernity, there are three types of arguments related to universalism that are employed to justify interference in other countries and continents: 1) The appeal to human rights and the spread of democracy as justification for interventions by establishing a dichotomy between civilization and barbarism; 2) The conception of the superiority of the West for being constituted from universal values in relation to the local narratives of other people; and 3)

The imposition of the market and neoliberal economy presents this model of economic organization as the only one possible or the best option.

At this point, we come to the structuring of postcolonial and decolonial theories. In particular, European thinkers highlighted the internal limits of modernity by exploring considerations such as its logocentrism, phallocentrism, and binary thinking. We can witness the effects of these approaches in many fields, including religious studies. Since language is not neutral, disinterested, or universal, science is a way of knowledge that constitutes itself as an instrument of power and domination. Concepts are elaborated according to interests in a complex web of power. To identify this, we must analyze conceptions and theories from the ideological point of view and consider their historical context and intentions. However, decolonial theory wants to go further than simply being an internal (European) critique of modernity by contemplating the other side of this story: coloniality (Mignolo, 2000, p. 96; King, 2009, p. 41).

In Latin America, especially Brazil, there is a tendency to treat the colonial only as a historical period limited to the past as if it was only a name for the 1500-1822 period when Brazil was under the Portuguese administration. However, decolonial theory proposes something else. Coloniality is still an ongoing process that is not limited to these centuries. Political and bureaucratic independence does not mean that the colonial complex of power has been overcome. It is still alive in administration, economy, social relations, and, most importantly, in epistemology. Therefore, the point of coloniality is not to consider the colonial as a past situation, but to ask what it means to think from the legacy of colonial narratives. As Walter Mignolo says, “It is not so much the historical postcolonial condition that should retain our attention, but rather the postcolonial *loci* of enunciation as an emerging discursive formation, and as a form of articulation of subaltern rationality” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 95).⁵ What is at stake is a hermeneutic horizon, i.e., a perspective that constitutes a place of enunciation. This historically and geographically situated horizon emerges from this condition of colony and at the same time has the desire to respond to this situation. For our discussion, this implies a place in which academic knowledge is in dialogue with the other forms of knowledge and practices, especially those silenced or forgotten by modernity/coloniality. For this very reason, this combative discourse is often

⁵ In the same perspective, V. Dass says, “Subaltern is not a category but rather a perspective and the subaltern perspective is not engaged in understanding such and such social organization or social actions per se but in understanding its “contractual” relations under colonial rules and the forms of domination belonging to the structures of modernity” (Dass, 1989, p. 313).

understood as a way of being, a re-existence, a dwelling, a doing, and a practice. More than merely a kind of knowledge or method, it is a way of placing oneself in the world.⁶

Decoloniality does not intend to be a mere negation of modernity or the inversion of its logic. This is not a discourse of resentment but or a reversal of the poles. Decoloniality does not simply raise what modernity considered low and demeaned to a higher status. The simple negation or inversion of modernity does not imply its subversion. As we have seen, these attitudes would only mean one more movement within modernity itself. Beyond this, the place of enunciation is a movement to the margins, beyond the self-centered to the colonial difference. In Mignolo's words, the colonial difference is:

[...] where local histories inventing and implementing global designs meet local histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored. The colonial difference is, finally, the physical as well as imaginary location where the coloniality of power is at work... (Mignolo, 2000, p. ix).

It is in the hybrid space opened by this difference where the thought and practice of the decolonial proposal is placed. For being a border place, in the colonial difference, it is not possible to characterize things very clearly. The delimitations are blurred, and the narratives are intertwined. On the one hand, there is not a simple denial of Western legacy; on the other hand, it does not mean a blind assimilation. There is the constitution of in-between hermeneutics, in which the modern and the local encounter each other. It is from this historical condition and hybrid place that thought and practice can break through.

For this reason, Mignolo insists that we should not think of modernity without its other side: coloniality. The Argentinian author asserts that modernity, as a world system, does not occur in an abstract mode. It must be understood in relation to the other (the colonies). This implies an expression that is recurrent in his texts: modernity/coloniality. This indicates that modernity cannot be thought of without its dark, forgotten, and neglected side. This side and knowledge are not only a derivative aspect of modernity but also a constitutive one. That means that there is no modernity without this other, without the colony and its ways of dwelling the Earth. This is because we come across not only economic domination but also a complex structure of management and control. After all, this

⁶ "Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity" (Mignolo; Walsh, 2018, p. 17).

relationship establishes hierarchies, creates discriminatory classification systems involving race, and instates patriarchalism on new grounds.

Therefore, if modernity is identified by self-referentiality, the other only gains its legitimacy as it is integrated into this totality or when it is silenced. Integrating subjugation is precisely coloniality. If this modernity deals with the other, it does so by effacing and reducing it to the sameness. In a set of mirrors, modernity sees itself. To achieve this, it must reduce the other and the difference to sameness. This forgetting is not just setting differences aside, but an erasure of the difference. This happens not only in the political field but also in the epistemological field (Said, 2003). Therefore, the epistemological question assumes an important place in decolonial theory. It is not enough to deal with more regional dimensions of life; it is necessary to go to the ground from where they gain significance. The intention is to go to the root from where the concepts that organize these other dimensions of life are articulated. Therefore, addressing epistemology does not mean addressing abstruse notions that have nothing to do with everyday life. Rather, the way we think has immediate repercussions on the construction of worldviews, hierarchies, and classifications.

Thus, it is not a matter of conceiving a theory divorced from a practice; both are so interrelated that one gains meaning in the relationship with the other. In Mignolo's words:

What matters is not economics, or politics, or history, but knowledge. Better yet, what matters is history, politics, economics, race, gender, sexuality, but it is above all the knowledge that is intertwined in all these praxical spheres that entangles us to the point of making us believe that it is not knowledge that matters but really history, economy, politics, etc (Mignolo, Walsh, 2018, p. 135).⁷

Thus, the first step of decoloniality is to promote the deconstruction of modern/colonial rationality, which was intended to be universal, ahistorical, and disinterested, and organize the difference within a hierarchical and binary frame. However, in a more constructive moment, decoloniality can give voice to other rationalities and modes of knowing and inhabiting the earth. Thus, it is not just a proposal that serves to deconstruct. As the first step, deconstruction is important for paving the way for other rationalities. If deconstruction reveals the dogmatic moments of great systems and narratives, then southern epistemologies constitute the other side that contributes to the (re)construction of other ways of knowing.

⁷ In another quote, he affirms, "Knowledge has a privileged position: it occupies the level of the enunciated, where the content of the conversation is established, and it occupies the level of enunciation, which regulates the terms of the conversation" (Mignolo, Walsh, 2018, p. 144).

Since decolonial theories expose this dark side of modernity by giving voice to silenced discourses, they clearly have emancipatory and ethical goals. It is not a matter of knowing by knowing but of building from the many silenced voices from the fringes. As the Portuguese writer Bonaventura Santos expresses, “the epistemologies of the South concern the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” (Santos, 2018, p. 1). It is with this proposal in mind that these decolonial theories create a *locus of enunciation* for the indigenous, black, poor, and marginalized people and communities. In doing so, they promote knowledge constituted outside the logic of modernity. It is recognized that this knowledge and other epistemologies are human responses to address human problems. As such, they are valid as a way of inhabiting the earth.

3 THE IMPARTIALITY AND METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

In the late nineteenth century, a proposition was made to designate a specific field, which was hardly attached to the epistemological values of modernity, for the study of religion. Prior to that, there was naturally already significant research and ways of thinking about religion in philosophy, history, and theology. However, the intention was to develop a specific field with a comparative approach to several religious traditions that takes the comparative philologic as a methodological model. From then on, the link between the *Science of Religion* (*Religionswissenschaft*) and scientific ideals of modernity was clear.

One of the first demands of this new research field was to delineate its territory in relation to theology. The general argument was as follows. Theology is occupied with the task of interpreting the world from a faith perspective that is grounded on a specific set of symbols, myths, rituals, and doctrines. Religious studies are concerned with the human capacity to practice religion and, most importantly, the comparative study of a sphere of social life called *religion* with an unbiased point of view. Impartiality, disinterest, and/or objectivity are some terms that one can often find mentioned throughout the history of this field. By considering multiple methods, impartiality emphasizes a perspective that allows the researcher to construct religion as an object of analysis and scrutiny. It is no longer about thinking *from* religion, but thinking *about* religion. The non-confessional approach was

guaranteed by employing multiple methodologies derived from philology, anthropology, phenomenology, and history.

One of the founding fathers of this field, Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), considers the *Science of Religion* to be one of the highest human endeavors, despite its critics. These opponents can be found on two sides. For some, religion is so sacred and sublime that it cannot be approached rationally. For others, religion is a decaying form of knowledge. Max Müller disagrees with both. According to him, religion is worthy of reverence. However, real reverence is to treat religion with unquestionable fidelity to the truth, without fear or favor. Thus, the analysis of religion must be done impartially. Scholars must not have any practical interference or intent. They must only determine what religion is, what foundation it has in human capacities, and what the laws of its historical development are. He endorsed a linguistic approach, developing comparative studies of the various mythologies. In fact, there was much optimism on the part of the editor and translator of *The Sacred Books of the East*. He states, “A Science of Religion, based on impartial and a truly scientific comparison of all religions of humanity... is now a question of time” (Müller, 1893, p. 26).

This position also simultaneously emerged in another debate. Would it be possible for someone who belongs to a religious tradition to maintain this attitude of impartiality? One position regarding this came from C.P. Tiele, for whom impartiality should not be associated with skepticism. Religious scholars would be able to suspend their beliefs to develop a disinterested, objective, and impartial analysis. The attitude of impartiality was not a given approach but was reached through the hard efforts of suspending judgments, beliefs, and values.⁸

This emphasis on impartiality deeply marks the European *Science of Religion*. Many decades later, Jouco Bleeker articulated a very important idea for religious studies, especially for the phenomenological trend: the scientific study of religion must be shaped by empathy. The researcher must employ imagination to attempt to understand believers' experiences and feelings. However, this does not mean forgoing impartiality, which should appear in the academic rigor and the creation of comprehensive categories: “Religious phenomena must be studied critically, impartially, academically, and at the same time with empathy” (Bleeker, 1979, p. 176). Empathy and objectivity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, taking empathy into account could lead to greater objectivity and a better

⁸ “It is an error to suppose that one cannot take up such an impartial scientific position without being a sceptic; that one is disqualified for an impartial investigation if one possesses fixed and earnest religious convictions of one's own ; that a man is incapable of appreciating other forms of religion if he is warmly attached to the Church or religious community in which he has been brought” (Tiele, 1897, p. 11).

understanding of religious phenomena. Somehow, this European perspective was predominant for decades in the International Association of History of Religions (IAHR), of which Bleeker has been the secretary for many years. An interesting situation arises when the IAHR held a conference in Japan in 1958. The encounter with other ways of thinking about religion gave rise to some discussion about the relativity of the emphasis in these scientific principles. However, despite some discussion, the IAHR's modern design has little changed.

This conception of religious studies has raised practical concerns in the study of religion. This is noticeable even in more contemporary authors. On the one hand, they tend to assume the situated and ideological character of some concepts used to understand religion, including the concept of religion itself (see my article autor, 2023b). This approach has many names. Ivan Strenski, for example, calls it the ideological critique of concepts. As he notes, "In essence, ideological critique attempts to understand theories in terms of the larger contexts in which they may be embedded-in the biographies and intellectual projects of theorists, in certain social and cultural contexts and strategies, in definite institutional settings" (Strenski, 2004, p. 271). Thus, this proposal is engaged in the analysis of the concept's intentions, particularly those that want to be comprehensive and universal, with little or no attention to the power relation that gave shape to them. In fact, the Romanian historian religion Mircea Eliade (1959) becomes a favorite *punching bag* for these authors.

Even defending this critical analysis of the modern categories of comprehending religion, these authors understand that the study of religion is a strictly academic pursuit and should avoid being contaminated by non-academic commitments (Wiebe, 1999). The proposals, concerns, or perspectives must be considered extrinsic to the pure explication of religion. This applies to both religious and humanistic agendas (such as interfaith dialogue). In his view, these agendas represent theological remnants that contaminate the *pure* scientific study of religion. To offer resistance against the fragmentation of the field, Donald Wiebe advocates for applying cognitive science in the study of religion (Luther; Wiebe, 2012; Wiebe, 2013). For him, the only chance to have a true *science* of religion is to abandon the hermeneutical approach to religion and endorse this more cognitive method. With this, cultural issues have a relative weight. If what is important is how some religious behaviors in human beings are biologically grounded, then there is no room for a relativistic point of view. For us, what matters from this discussion is the following. In the case of this school, the situated character of comprehensive categories (e.g., sacred, religion) is assumed, but this does not necessarily imply a broader critique of epistemology or consideration of other

ways of knowing. Rather, it is stated a more *scientifically* paradigm and the reaffirmation of a certain *academicism*.

Another basic assumption of religious studies is related to the suspension of judgment, also known as *methodological agnosticism*. Ninian Smart, who coined this expression, argues that scholars should not make judgments about the reality of what religious communities or individuals believe. They should avoid any inquiry into the value and truth of the object of religion. For him, scholars should completely refrain from making any kind of judgments, whether they be confrontations or confirmations, about this dimension of religion. He states, “we neither affirm nor deny the existence of the gods” (Smart, 1973, p. 54). After all, for religious studies, religion matters as a human and cultural phenomenon. Thus, it is possible to establish a clear boundary: religious studies are limited to the human dimensions of religion. With that delimitation, the researcher of religion has at hand a discourse of the believer. This means that the only accessible face of religion is what the believers say about their faith and experiences but not the objects of faith in themselves.⁹ This discourse can be structured in many types of expressions such as symbols, myths, rites, doctrines, systems of thought, testimonies, and so on. The function of the scholar is to interpret and explain this discourse. Therefore, due to this limitation, scientific reductionism is unavoidable.

New questions, topics of analysis, methodologies, theories, and perspectives have emerged with the development of religious studies. Nonetheless, it is important to note how recurrent is the conception that a central characteristic of religious studies is to produce knowledge *about* religion, which requires the suspension of the judgment and the disinterested, impartial, neutral, unbiased, or distanced perspective. This need is crucial to sustain the difference between religious studies and theological approaches. As we shall see, here lies a main challenge brought forth by decolonial theories.

4 SOME QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Given this framework, I would like to highlight some questions that arose when we relate decolonial theories and this perspective of religious studies toward religion. My purpose is not to provide answers to these challenges, but to point out pertinent issues.

⁹ G. van der Leeuw, for example, states that the phenomenologist “can only discuss what is reported to him; he can listen for the authentic sounds, and describe the objects wherein, according to the believer’s own statements, revelation has for him, been affected” (Leeuw, 1963, p. 566).

4.1 Question 1

Scientific discourse is a language game that depends on metanarratives to legitimate itself. With the forthcoming of local narratives, this kind of knowledge loses its normativity. In a movement from the south, decolonial theories deepen the recognition of the situated character of knowledge and the power relations that command it. More than the noble intention to know, knowledge establishes fields of mastery. The concepts are akin to army that seeks to invade and dominate the other.

This recognition of the situated, ideological, and colonial character of every single act of knowing leads to more attention to the *loci* of enunciation. Decolonial theories are geographical and spatial theories. They do not deny the historical and the temporal; rather, they place important value on the place that someone takes and from where someone speaks. We do not explore this here, but many of the metaphors used are spatial. The place is a set of relations that shape a perspective by regulating what one can see or ignore. However, this complex of relations is also a site from which someone speaks. Therefore, the *other* is not merely an object but a subject of speech. Therefore, attention must be given to the conditions under which knowledge is produced. What intentions does it hide? Who does it include? What and who does it exclude? Where is this discourse produced from? Who speaks? For whom it is made? Who is silenced? And why?

As we have seen, religious studies differ from theology and claim that knowledge is *about* and not *from* religion. The emphasis on impartiality, disinterest, and detachment was intended to demarcate the possibility of an uncommitted view. If we assume a decolonial perspective, then what are the consequences for the distinction between studying *about* and thinking *from*? If religious studies include other epistemologies in which the religious element is constitutive, then is there still some distinction between theology and religious studies regarding their approach toward religion? In the end, if religious studies do not reduce the other to the Western categories, does the field dissolve itself into various theologies (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism)?

4.2 Question 2

By the redescription of the other in a different lexicon than that used by the religious ones, it is expected that the believers do not fully recognize themselves in the discourse *about* them. Take an example when someone explains religion with the sociological vocabulary. In

that case, the believers may argue if the researcher has done justice to their faith with that interpretation. Some important religious studies scholars made the defense of the prominent role of the believer in the certification of produced knowledge. In the 1960s, Wilfred C. Smith (1991) underlined the situated character of the notion of religion or categories created in the nineteenth century for the study of religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. He defended the central role of the uniqueness of each religious tradition: “No statement about a religion is valid unless it is recognized by the believers themselves” (Smith, 1996, p. 66). He recognizes that it is not easy to accept this methodological procedure, but it was an unavoidable conclusion of the principles that he assumed.

In the modern conception, the explanation given by scholars does not necessarily coincide with the view of the believers of the religion, although the perspective of believers is taken as a starting point for the study of religion. In other words, their speech is considered, but the interpretation (explanation) given to religion by scholars is different from that offered by believers. Religious vocabulary is often *translated* into less religious terms. We cannot forget that religion is considered from a methodological agnosticism point of view that implies an understanding that religion is a human and cultural phenomenon. In any case, great advances in the understanding of religion were possible due to this procedure. This is valid particularly for the critical and sociological perspectives, although we should take care with a possible (but unnecessary) arrogance that may derive from this.

However, when this happens, do we face the imposition of concepts from the Western scientific canons? Otherwise, if the believers have the last word, then what is the legitimacy of explanations that point out aspects not perceived by the faithful or with which they disagree? How does this work when we consider religion in a cross-cultural or compared way? This does not exclude the need for empathy, much less forbid the believers to have an opinion. The question is narrower: how far must explanations in religious studies be tied to the lexicon and subordinate itself to the authority of the believers? On the other hand, are sociological, psychological, or economic explanations not a colonial imposition of Western scientific categories?

4.3 Question 3

A concrete example could be helpful. It is my intention to bring a new piece to this puzzle, but not to explore this in more detail. A class called *Religious Education* is included in the curriculum of public schools in Brazil. This class has been offered for centuries,

although there have been recurring debates on its legitimacy, what should be taught, what kind of education should the teacher have, and its role in the formation of the student. Since Brazil is a secular country in theory, some assert the illegality of this discipline. For them, religion is a private matter to be taught at home and in religious institutions, but not in school. In contrast, some teachers use this space for religious proselytizing, overlapping the classroom and the pulpit. Finally, there is a third option that is closer to the religious studies courses in Brazil. It argues that eliminating the discussion of religion from the curriculum does not mean that religion will be absent from the school community. Therefore, since religion is a constitutive feature of public space, it is the students' right to have the opportunity to learn about religion, particularly the religious traditions of their own context. This *third way* articulates two things. It defends the necessity of teaching about religion. However, this teaching is justified for social and political reasons. Therefore, the goal of this class should not be spiritual education but the construction of citizenship in a plural and democratic society (Rodrigues, 2013). To understand the importance of this, it is crucial to keep in mind the increasing incidence of religious intolerance in Brazil, particularly in the school environment.

Therefore, this proposal argues that in public schools, teachers should make use of tools for religious studies and their methodologies and approaches. Despite opposition from conservative religious groups, in several states of Brazil, it is recognized that the most qualified teacher of *religious education* is a former student of religious studies courses.

In this context, which is marked by intense religious conflicts, the use of modern epistemology has been shown to be an important mediation to approach religion to promote a comprehensive attitude toward otherness. This reception of modern epistemology can give voice to religious groups in the school environment. Should not these *survival strategies* be taken more in consideration to reveal the complexity of the reception of modernity?

4.4 Question 4

What challenges does religion bring to decolonial theories? In my view, the absence or little emphasis on the religious dimension in decolonial epistemologies is quite symptomatic. This absence occurs in at least two aspects. Often, the extent to which religion is a formative part of modernity/coloniality is not considered. Mignolo (2007, p. 36), for example, mentions Christianity as an oppressive religion in dealing with the dimensions of colonial logic. Mignolo makes reference to the economic, political, social, and

epistemological dimensions. More recently, he has paid slightly more attention to religion, but does not show much interest in deepening the subject (Mignolo, 2009; 2018, p. 153). However, is it possible to understand this process of coloniality and decoloniality without the decisive role of religion? What about the encounter of Christianity with indigenous and black religions?

There remains the other side, which is even more complex. In the context of Latin America, the process of secularization is quite peculiar. If religion can be responsible for alienation, then it is also a powerful mechanism of liberation. In Latin America, there is no grassroots movement that does not have a religious element. Therefore, could a southern epistemology not give a central role to the religious dimension? (Barreto; Sirvent, 2019). Is a secularized decolonial epistemology contradictory?

With this, we return to the basic distinction. Is thinking of an epistemology from religious bases and concepts itself a kind of theology?

5 FINAL REMARKS

This article does not intend to provide solutions but rather to provoke questions. The starting point was that religion studies make an ideological critique of certain concepts, but they are still tied to a certain conception of knowledge and science. There is a deconstruction of some concepts, but the epistemological presuppositions remain unquestioned. In some situations, there is an affirmation of an even more exaggerated modern scientific value. There is a reason for this. Religious studies emerged as a modern science and remains very tied to these assumptions.

One question that remains is when opening up to other knowledge (other epistemologies), to what extent does religious studies dissolve into many different kinds of theologies? Theology is a way of thinking about cultural issues from religious references and perspectives. Somehow, part of what has been proposed as decolonial thinking in religious studies in Brazil ends up incurring this theological approach. Therefore, perhaps the great challenge of decolonial theories for religious studies is how to recognize and assume the legitimacy of other types of knowledge (including those in which the religious element is constitutive) without dissolving the legacy and perspective of religious studies in theological discourses.

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