8. Seeing the Unseen? Silenced Voices, Excluded Knowledge, and the Question of Representation in the World Church

Sigrid Rettenbacher

The biblical accounts of Easter telling the encounter of the resurrected Christ with different people all revolve around a new way of seeing or—more precisely—around recognizing something that has been so unexpected that one has not been able to see it before. Mary of Magdala, the disciples of Emmaus, and Thomas, all come to understand reality in a more adequate way after hearing a word or seeing a deed of the resurrected one. Interestingly enough, as the Christian tradition developed over time, this capability of seeing the so far unseen seems to have been lost. The attempt to preserve the memory and witness of the beginnings of Christianity has led to an alluring certainty that resulted in blind spots within the discourses of the church, which has often refused to reflect on processes of powerful marginalization and exclusion in its own tradition. The example of Mary Magdalene, who has changed from the first witness of the resurrection and *apostola apostolorum* to a sinful whore and prostitute to diminish the importance of a woman in a male-written tradition, is just one case in point.[1] Even if Pope Francis has once again drawn attention to the significance of Mary Magdalene as *apostola apostolorum*, the consequences for the status of women within the Roman Catholic Church have not been drawn.[2]

[1] Silke Petersen, *Maria aus Magdala. Die Jüngerin, die Jesus liebte* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011).

[2] Regina Heyder, for example, criticizes "Churchsplaining," a "wohlmeinend-patriarchale[s] Erklären der Kirche durch Kleriker," that is a well-meaning but still patriarchal explanation of the church by clerics. Regina Heyder, "Subversive Stimmen von Frauen. Perspektiven der Kirchengeschichte," *Lebendige Seelsorge* 71, no. 3 (2020): 174. The South African theologian Nontando Hadebe describes the exclusion of women by the hierarchical structures of the church as an act of violence. Referring to Teresia Hinga, a theologian from Kenya, Hadebe points to the "männliche Dominanz als Norm des Christentums," which results in a top-down ecclesiology that

This chapter is an attempt to make visible the unseen in the Christian tradition by reflecting on the question of representation and silenced voices, as well as excluded knowledge in the tradition of the church. The concrete starting point is the worldwide Synod on Synodality and the discussions around the question of women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ in the world church. Underneath this discussion lurks the question of how to deal with differences within the community of the world church, how those differences affect the unity of the church, and how to tackle the tension between universality and particularity in the church as a worldwide community. Thus, the challenges of the Synod on Synodality are very much connected to the challenges of the project of intercultural ethics. In the following, I want to present some preliminary remarks, observations, and questions concerning the issue of doing ethics in a world church. The intercultural aspect of this issue is considered from the perspective of feminist, post-/decolonial,[3] and critical whiteness studies by focusing on certain discourse politics that can be observed in ecclesial contexts. The focus is not so much on the academic context of doing ethics in an intercultural way but on discourse strategies and representation politics used by official representatives of the church, especially the question of how references to the world church are deployed in their discourses.

not only affects women, but all people concerned about the rights and well-being of those at the lower end of the hierarchy. Nontando Hadebe, "Wie wir uns selbst befreien. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians und Catholic Women Speak Network," in *Catholic Women. Menschen aus aller Welt für eine gerechtere Kirche*, ed. U. Leimgruber (Echter, 2021), 141.

[3] For the relation between "postcolonial" and "decolonial," see Stefan Silber, "Das entkolonisierte Klassenzimmer. Postkolonial-theologische Perspektiven für die Religionspädagogik," *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum* 31, no. 1 (2023): 13–29, doi.org/10.25364/10.31:2023.1.2, 18–19. In this chapter, both terms are used interchangeably, focusing on their shared critique of colonialism and its aftermath.

Challenging "Active Ignorance" by Bringing Different Perspectives Together

When trying to reflect on theological and ethical questions in an intercultural way, it is helpful to make clear from the very beginning where one stands, as one's own context inevitably influences one's own way of thinking and doing theology. I am a white Catholic theologian from Austria, which means I write from a privileged perspective in many ways. But I am also a woman in the Catholic Church, which means my perspective is marginalized, in the sense that women are represented by men and are excluded from decision-making processes within the church, since these processes are controlled by men. Seen through an intersectional lens, my own perspective is thus simultaneously privileged and excluded. The experience of being privileged in certain areas in comparison to many others, and at the same time knowing how discrimination and exclusion feel, has shaped my interest in approaches to theology that offer a (self-)critical perspective on theological tradition and its under-scrutinized certainties. Thus, my interest in feminist and decolonial perspectives in theology stems from personal experiences within the church.

I want to start my reflections with an insight from critical whiteness studies that has informed my own thinking and can clarify theological reflections as well by challenging certain theological assumptions that are taken as self-evident. Critical whiteness studies emphasize the fact that the privilege of being white is clearly felt by those who do not take part in this privilege, but it is invisible to those who profit from this privilege.[4] This thought can be expanded to what Charles Mills calls "white ignorance."[5] While marginalized people have an interest in understanding the world of

[4] See Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *Meridians: Journal of Women, Race and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2006): 104–126; Jennifer Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for *Dis*identifying with Jesus," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. G. Yancy (Routledge, 2012), 84–86.

[5] Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. S. Sullivan and N. Tuana (State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38.

privileged others to prevent detrimental and harmful situations, privileged groups do not have an interest in understanding the world of the marginalized as it would call their own worldview and habits into question. Privileged groups thus embrace active ignorance—refusing to know things that could be known—in order not to be compelled to interrogate their own presuppositions and privileges. This active ignorance has a social dimension as well, which means that it structures and influences societies and institutions—for example, the church. Of course, this habit of ignoring what one does not want to know because it is inconvenient does not only apply to the attitude of white people toward people of color. From an intersectional perspective, it can also be applied to diverse forms of discrimination (gender, social status, laity vs. clergy, etc.). Thus, one has to ask how the church's position is influenced by privileges—to the exclusion of other perspectives—and how it is possible to incorporate multiple and diverse perspectives into the church's point of view in order to correct this epistemic power imbalance and its practical consequences.

The insights from critical whiteness studies help us scrutinize elements of ecclesial discourses that are often not reflected on. There is a difference between what one cannot speak about because it is linked to the vastness of the divine mystery, which transcends human insights, and what one does not want to or is not allowed to talk about because it would call into question some insights or advantages that privileged parties do not want to give up.[6] Theo-logy ("talk about God") and the passing on of faith (Romans 10:17) in the church are deeply dependent on language. One cannot grasp God or witness God's deeds and history with humankind beyond the realm of language. Theology is thus a discursive enterprise. It is here where theology and postcolonial studies are intimately connected and where theology can learn from postcolonial perspectives and their

[6] In German, I refer to this difference by using the juxtaposition of "Unsagbares" and "Ungesagtes." Sigrid Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht . . . Eine Theologie des Ungesagten," in *Spielarten der Macht. Theologie orten und räumen mit Hans-Joachim Sander*, ed. C. Kern, J. Gruber and C. Bauer (Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2024), 251–286.

awareness of power dynamics and how they relate to the construction of reality and identities.[7] Thus, for theology and the church, reflecting the question of identity politics, representation, and power is indispensable and irreducible—even if such questions are not normally asked in mainstream theological and ecclesiological discourses. The tension between that which cannot be said and that which one does not want or is not allowed to talk about is part of the power politics of the church (as can be seen in the abuse of power in various church contexts)—even if reflecting on this tension has over a long period of time been and is still part of that which is not spoken about. Or, to put it another way, it is part of the active ignorance of the Christian tradition. As language and discourse are closely connected to representation and thus to the question of who or what can (not) be seen, theology and the church must confront the question of the unseen in the Christian tradition(s).

Women, Gender, and LGBTQIA+: Examples of the Unseen in the Church and their Implications for Doing Ethics in an Intercultural Way

It is here where I want to connect the question of the unsaid or unseen to the world church and ethical topics in an intercultural setting. I want to do this by referring to three exemplary observations in the recent official discourse of the Catholic Church that seem—at first sight—not to be connected but are in fact closely intertwined. The examples are taken from the European context but reveal a strong entanglement with questions concerning the world church.

Pope Francis's Visit to Hungary

During his visit to Hungary in 2023, Pope Francis criticized Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's attitude toward migration politics (which is one of the

[7] Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht."

strictest and most exclusionary in the European Union), but he shared his critique of the "ideological colonization"[8] of mind through gender discourse[9]—thus indirectly supporting Orbán's questionable attitude and politics regarding women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ issues. This shows the church's ambivalent and mixed understanding of what it means to stand on the side of the marginalized and excluded. There seem to be areas of exclusion and marginalization that are privileged in the discourse of the church and where the church has a critical and also influential voice in society (e.g., migration, poverty, and environmental issues). And there are excluded topics in the church's ethical reflection—such as gender, women's rights, and some issues related to sexuality—where the church itself produces excluded others.

The Letter to the German Bishops

During the worldwide process of the Synod on Synodality, some topics like women in the church or women's ordination, as well as a variety of other gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, became very prominent. Those topics have also been central to the Synodal Path in Germany, which started two years before the worldwide Synod on Synodality and has, for example, led to a change in ecclesial labor legislation in some German dioceses, where for the first time sexual orientation is no longer a ground for dismissal. Even if the question of the position of women in the church, along with LGBTQIA+ topics, has been present in the continental stages and then in the universal phase of the Synod on Synodality, those issues have often been minimalized in their relevance by placing them in the

[8] Francis, "Address at the Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps in Budapest," April 28, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/april/documents/20230428-ungheria-autorita.html. Even if Pope Francis is against criminalizing homosexuality ("Pope and Protestant Leaders Denounce Anti-gay Laws," *BBC*, February 5, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-64532639), his stand against "gender ideology" discursively supports the discrimination and also persecution of LGBTQIA+ persons.

[9] For a critical discussion of "gender ideology" see Gerhard Marschütz, *Gender-Ideologie!? Eine katholische Kritik* (Echter, 2023).

broader context of the world church. Allegedly, those topics gain emphasis only in some Western countries but are not relevant in other parts of the world. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's Secretary of State, and Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, officially informed the German Bishops' Conference in November 2023 not to waste their time with the question of women's ordination or LGBTQIA+ issues, as the church's position regarding those topics will not change.[10] These issues—so the argument goes—are only discussed in a few Western countries, so they cannot be dealt with in the context of the world church as they would threaten the unity of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, discussing these questions in a worldwide context is often equated to neocolonial paternalism. Of course, the argument neglects the fact that there is a plurality of positions in non-Western parts of the world—thus homogenizing and essentializing those contexts—and has not posed the question of representation: Who speaks for those contexts and whose interests are (not) represented?

Import of Priests

To address the lack of priests in Western societies, the church sticks to what can be read as a neo-colonial policy of "importing" priests from countries of the Global South, thereby sidestepping the question of ordination requirements.[11] Viewing the policy of "importing" foreign priests through a postcolonial perspective and connecting it to feminist and intersectional questions reveals an ethical dimension to this pastoral practice as well.

[10] "Einige deutsche Bischöfe schienen das nicht zu verstehen. Glaubenspräfekt Fernández: Papst ist kein liberaler Reformer," *katholisch.de*, December 31, 2023, katholisch.de/artikel/49971-glaubenspraefekt-fernandez-papst-ist-kein-liberaler-reformer.

[11] Besides the ordination of women, the ordination of homosexual or transgender men is also excluded in ecclesial discourse politics.

Implications

The three examples show that questions of power, representation, and hierarchy are strongly entangled with questions of gender and sexuality in the Catholic Church. The church as a hierarchical, patriarchal, heteronormative system founded on a deeply entrenched clericalism is based on a system of (epistemic) exclusion of topics that would call this system into question and show the necessity of alternatives.[12] This mode of exclusion is a systemic part of the church. It helps—in an attitude of active ignorance—to stabilize and support the status quo. Intercultural relations are sometimes used as a factor to support this system. It is only since Pope Francis—the first Latin American pope—that non-Western perspectives have been prominently brought into the official discourse of the world church. Still, the use of these perspectives is limited to certain areas (like creation and relatedness as, for example, in *Querida Amazonia* or *Laudato Si'*), and it does not go hand in hand with an attempt to decolonize theological thinking in the church on a broad scale. However, when questions of gender and sexuality are at issue, the world church, decolonization and non-Western perspectives are willingly used as an argument against tackling these urgent theological and ethical questions. An alleged "decolonization of mind" is used as a hypocritical fake argument to prolong structures of suppression and exclusion in those areas.

Non-Western perspectives are still marginalized in the world church—or at least limited to specific areas—and there is no strong emphasis on decolonizing a Western mode of thinking within the church. At the same time, allegedly non-Western perspectives and decolonial arguments are willingly used as an argument to exclude critical topics—such as gender equality or sexual orientation—and to prolong structures of exclusion and suppression. Therefore, the discourse politics of using the world church as an argument in theological and ethical debates becomes itself ethically

[12] See footnote 2.

fraught, revealing active ignorance on different levels, thus supporting an unjust system of privileges.

Insights from Sociology of Knowledge and Postcolonial Theories

It is illuminating to confront the discourse politics that uses tradition and the unity of the church as a strong argument and often relies on active ignorance with insights from the sociology of knowledge and postcolonial theories. The sociology of knowledge tells us that our understanding of reality is socially constructed.[13] This is also true of traditions and norms as culturally and socially influenced expressions of moral intuitions. Both can be perceived as social constructs that are naturalized and stabilized by the process of socialization. In the context of faith communities such as the church, the process of stabilizing norms and traditions is often reinforced by sacralization, which means that the norm is connected to a divine origin, thus making it even harder to put the norm under scrutiny.[14] Therefore, through being socialized into the community of the church, one cannot easily scrutinize the dominant forms of knowledge, as traditions and norms seem to be naturally given or even rooted in divine law. The social constructedness of norms is difficult to perceive, as it is hidden and masked through the process of socialization. This process therefore serves—in a circular way—to stabilize the status quo and prevent questioning, altering, and changing the socially constructed norms and traditions.

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[13] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday, 1966).

[14] This is also true for a colonial worldview which is strongly entangled with the Christian faith: "Historically, it is important to recognize that Christian theology was not simply affected by colonialism. Christian theologies of empire were not simply a by-product of the colonial era; they helped to justify, sustain and sacralise it. Christian ethics provides some core building blocks that made Christian colonialism acceptable." Selina Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved? Colonialism, Racial Justice, and the Task of Decolonising Christian Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024): 5, doi.org/10.1177/09539468231213557.

What the sociology of knowledge tells us about the performativity of norms and traditions becomes even more complex and challenging when combined with insights from postcolonial theories about discursive identity constructions, representation, and power. Postcolonial theories claim that reality is not only described by discourses but that it is the discourses themselves that construct reality. In the discursive construction of reality, however, the balance of power is not equally distributed. There are those who have the power to speak and thus to define and represent reality. And there are those—the "others"—who do not have the power to speak for themselves and are thus defined and represented by the powerful. Therefore, questions of discursive identity construction, representation, and power are deeply connected to processes of marginalization and exclusion. Seen from a theological perspective, the church can be read as the place of such identity constructions.[15] It is the place where Christian identity is discursively constructed and performatively enacted by bringing into language what happened at Easter and by spreading the Good News over times and places. Thus, it is important to put ecclesial discourses under scrutiny in order to see where they do not guarantee or safeguard Christian identity, but in fact possibly imperil the Christian message by unjust forms of exclusions.[16] Such critical reflections are all the more necessary, as it is not only the colonial world that was constructed by way of discourse and power. Colonial cartography and its forms of knowledge—in short, coloniality—influence how we understand the current world as well. The church and its knowledge, traditions, and norms take part in this coloniality, too.

When coloniality is based on a certain perception of the world seen through the lens of colonial power, alternative forms of knowledge and discourses are excluded. Those excluded forms of knowledge are linked to

[15] Sigrid Rettenbacher, *Außerhalb der Ekklesiologie keine Religionstheologie. Eine postkoloniale Theologie der Religionen* (Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2019).

[16] Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht"; Sigrid Rettenbacher, "Zerbrochene Gewissheiten in verwobenen Geschichten. Ein post-/dekolonial inspirierter Blick auf Theologie und Kirche," in *Postcolonial Studies interdisziplinär*, ed. J. Allerstorfer-Hertel, K. Winkler, and L. Kaelin (forthcoming 2026).

complex and entangled histories of epistemicides and genocides in which questions of religion, race, social status, and gender are intricately interwoven.[17] Thus, the church—as the place of Christian identity construction—takes part in these colonial histories and narratives of excluded knowledge as well. This form of colonial knowledge emerged in the precolonial Spain of the Reconquista in the sixteenth century, where humankind was divided into those with the right and wrong religion. During the colonial expansions, those discourses about religion were transferred to other areas like race and gender, connected to the question of being human (or not), and finally universalized. The discursive and social constructedness of those discourses, however, has often been forgotten.[18] As a consequence, Western forms of knowledge—with certain perceptions of what counts as relevant knowledge but also with certain assumptions about religion, race, and gender—are portrayed as universal as a result of coloniality. Thus, it is through coloniality that we perceive certain particular forms of knowledge as allegedly universal truths.[19]

In the context of the church, being aware of coloniality means asking whether or how a hegemonic dominance of Western forms of knowledge has shaped ecclesial discourses in the past (i.e., in the genealogy of tradition) and in the present (i.e., in the normative effects of this tradition). Otherwise, an unawareness of the coloniality effective in ecclesial discourses leads to the paradoxical situation that certain Western norms that were exported to other parts of the world in the past come back in the

[17] Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century," *Human Architecture. Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no. 1 (2013): 73–90; Manuela Boatcă, "Gendering Global Entanglements: Decolonizing Inequalities," in *Global Contestations of Gender Rights*, ed. A. Scheele, J. Roth, and H. Winkel (Bielefeld University Press, 2022), 45–62; José-Manuel Barreto and Ina Kerner, "Decolonizing Universalism? A Dialogue on Women's Rights, Feminist Struggles and the Possibilities and Problems of Universal Norms," in *Global Contestations of Gender Rights*, ed. A. Scheele, J. Roth and H. Winkel (Bielefeld University Press, 2022), 135–148.

[18] Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge," 84; Barreto and Kerner, "Decolonizing Universalism," 138; Boatcă, "Gendering Global Entanglements," 52.

[19] Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge;" Barreto and Kerner, "Decolonizing Universalism;" Boatcă, "Gendering Global Entanglements."

present as allegedly original non-Western traditions—as will be shown in the next section.

The postcolonial strategy of provincializing the center (i.e., dominant Western forms of knowledge) is not yet a mainstream interest within theology or the church. Rather, quite the contrary, when the church refers to provincializing the center, it uses the phrase as a strategic instrument to strengthen certain privileged positions and to fend off certain topics. Some of these topics are the question of women in the church, gender, or LGBTQIA+ rights—which, in the sense of active ignorance and with a heteropatriarchal and heteronormative impetus, shall remain at the margins. Thus, actual plurality in the world church is often made invisible in the church—via discursive strategies of essentializing, homogenizing, and othering. These strategies are used in order to emphasize the unity of the church, which is constructed through a Western-dominated perspective characterized by active ignorance. Therefore, seemingly naturally given traditions and norms are—due to the social constructedness of tradition mentioned above—difficult to put into question, criticize, or change, both on the level of the world church as well as on the level of the local church.

In this discursive and performative process, privileges and active ignorance are handed down as normative traditions and even sacralized so that it is hard to unlearn and provincialize dominant Western positions and perspectives. Moreover, the theological method of seeing, judging, and acting, which is often used to find answers to new challenges in ethical decision-making processes, is affected by the described insights from the sociology of knowledge and postcolonial theories which show the limits of this three-step process. The process of seeing, judging, and acting can be part of an active ignorance within the church: It is part of a complex system of power and representation and may be prone to abuse as well. If the seeing and judging are part of coloniality and exclude the unseen and that which is not spoken about, then the judging (as well as the resulting acting) is limited and does not rest on the best presuppositions, thus supporting

an unjust status quo. This shows that insights from postcolonial theories are central not only to theology but to ethics as well.[20]

The Unity of the World Church as an Argument: Unseen Aspects and Discourse Policies

With this said, it is time to look at the argument of the world church in more detail—inspired by a decolonial perspective. As mentioned above, the unity of the world church is repeatedly used as an argument to stop discussions in the church. When it comes to certain ethical questions like the position of women in the church or the question of gender and LGBTQIA+ rights, the unity of the world church is used to keep the status quo and to preserve—in an act of active ignorance—the privileges of decision makers within the Catholic Church, which is structured as a male, heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, and clerical hierarchy.

The argument is presented in a way that intertwines theological and decolonial justifications. It firstly states that there is no necessity—even more, no possibility—to change the position of the church vis-à-vis women, gender, or members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The argument made is that equal rights and a more differentiated perspective only represent Western voices and are not shared by people from the Global South. Therefore, changing the teaching position of the church concerning those topics would put at stake the unity of the church and would not serve liberation purposes. On the contrary, it would be a neocolonial suppression of the Global South.[21]

Deploying the unity of the world church as a theological and decolonial argument, the discussion is brought to an end. However, if one takes a closer look at both aspects of the argument, the case is not that clear. First,

[20] See the special issue on "Racial Justice and Decolonizing Christian Ethics" of the *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024).

[21] For the case of homosexuality, see Caleb M. Day, "Decolonial Homophobia: Is Decolonisation Incompatible with LGBT+ Affirmation in Christian Ethics?," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2024): 71–92, doi.org/10.1177/09539468231215304.

in no part of the world are theological positions concerning women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ rights clear cut. Otherwise, there would be no heated discussions going on.[22] Second, it is right that neocolonial strategies should not be deployed, but if one takes a closer look, it is obvious that the more traditional positions concerning women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ are themselves the result of a colonial expansion of Western forms of knowledge, as will be shown shortly.[23] Therefore, it is necessary to look at the argument of the unity of the world church and its decolonial and neocolonial implications in more detail. It is important to understand how this argument functions and how it is related to the unseen and to active ignorance in the church.

Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the argument of the unity of the world church is far more complex than its representation in the official ecclesial discourse. When the world church is used as an argument, one has to ask about the representation processes on which this argument rests. Who has the power to speak for and represent the different parts of the world church? And which voices are silenced in these representation processes—that is, what are the unseen aspects of the concrete forms of representation? Even if the Synod on Synodality's agenda is to hear all voices in the church, the actual reality of church discourses still shows a different scenario. The representation of women, along with gender diverse, queer, and LGBTQIA+ persons, in church discourses—often through official representatives—seems to be based on strategies of homogenization, essentializing, and othering.[24] The countries of the

[22] *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (Paulist Press, 2015); *Catholic Women. Menschen aus aller Welt für eine gerechtere Kirche*, ed. U. Leimgruber (Echter, 2021).

[23] Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 84–85.

[24] "Colonisation also erased histories of non-patriarchal gender expression and non-heteronormative sexuality. Pre-colonial gender and sexual diversity are forgotten, ignored, or attributed to outside Arabic influence, producing the view that homosexuality has always been 'un-African'. Recovering LGBT+ history in Uganda, India, Canada, Samoa, and Aotearoa/New Zealand is important decolonisation work." Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 85. Thus, "Failing to acknowledge diversity repeats colonial reification of one monolithic 'African' viewpoint." Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 83.

Global South are represented as a homogenous entity, where the positions in regard to gender and sexuality are presented as quite uniform. The actual plurality of voices in those countries is silenced. Thus, persons who try to opt for a more diverse perspective on gender and sexuality in the West as well as in the Global South are—through a process of othering—represented as outside the norm. To put it another way, the argument of the world church which—by active ignorance—tries to preserve the status quo in an unquestioned manner rests on producing excluded and unseen others through ecclesial discourses. An imagined unity of the church is thereby produced by making invisible actual plurality and differences.

Recent research has shown that there is a complex entanglement of discourses on religion, race, ethnicity, and gender in the colonial world and its aftermath, where forms of discrimination, suppression, and non-representation overlap in intersectional ways. The coloniality of power and the colonial difference still influence our perception of the world, and various forms of suppression and discrimination have to be analyzed through an intersectional lens.[25] Even feminist theories can be affected by this coloniality when the focus is on the position of white women exclusively, not recognizing that women of color or subaltern women have been influenced by Western gender norms in very different ways than white women. Thus, the very concept of gender and its connection to race, ethnicity, social status, and so on is itself deeply entangled in colonial histories and has to be scrutinized in regard to its participation in coloniality.[26] However, the classical argument of official church discourses

[25] See María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–759, jstor.org/stable/40928654, who is referring to Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo.

[26] Lugones, "Decolonial Feminism;" María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–219, jstor.org/stable/4640051. "What I have called modern colonial alterities are basically the 'others' of colonial men, the others of the colonially enforced, prototypical 'human.'" Boatcă, "Gendering Global Entanglements," 52. Or to put it another way: "Universal humanity only included white male heterosexual Europeans. . . . Historically, European universalism has been only inclusive of Europeans, while non-Europeans were excluded from humanity. On the surface, universal humanity is inclusive and encompasses all human beings, but only at first sight. It has been historically exclusionary when faced with the definition of who is a human being. Therefore, along the global history of the modern/colonial world and patriarchy,

that the position regarding women, gender identities, and sexual orientation cannot be changed due to attitudes in the Global South rests on severe blind spots about the colonial past and its present effects.

There have been a variety of gender roles and sexual identities in the pre-colonial world, which have been dramatically changed through the history of colonial and missionary encounters. In quite a number of cultures, one finds examples of women occupying prominent roles in society and religion. Moreover, sexual orientations and gender roles have been much more varied than is reflected in Catholic discourses today, and there are examples of a third gender in countries of the Global South as well.[27] Of course, non-Western cultures used very different concepts and terms to describe their understanding of gender and sexuality in precolonial times, which did not correspond to Western concepts, interpretations, and perceptions. Those alternative ways of representation have, however, been made invisible over time due to the power of Western Christian discourse politics. So Western ways of speaking about gender and sexuality—whether more traditional or liberal—have a colonial history that has to be tackled and reflected on. This history is heavily dependent on the history of the church and its definition of sex and gender roles. Traditional ecclesial mainstream positions are—because of their connection to power and the privilege to define and represent—more prone to blind spots due to active ignorance, as can be illustrated by various examples from different contexts of the Global South.

When Spanish missionaries reached the Tagalog and Visayan areas in the Philippines in the sixteenth century, for example, they were confronted with a spiritual animist system where the position of spiritual leadership—

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women, queers and natives have been labelled as non-human, less-human or inferior humans, contradicting both principles of humanity and equality." Barreto and Kerner, "Decolonizing Universalism," 138. During the colonization process cultures were also classified along the binary opposition of rational/irrational, civilized/uncivilized, male/female, superior/ inferior, etc. Rettenbacher, *Außerhalb der Ekklesiologie*, 191; Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 192.

[27] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 196, 201; Carolyn Brewer, "*Baylan*, *Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy: Gender, Sexuality and the Sacred in Early Colonial Philippines," *Intersections. Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 2, no. 1 (1999): intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html.

the shamans—was predominantly taken over by women.[28] Men could only fill the position of a shaman when cross-dressing as a woman and when behaving like a female shaman. In other words, spiritual potency for males was only possible when it was linked with "non-conforming gender behaviour."[29] So "the indigenous constructions of gender [that the missionaries encountered] . . . departed substantially from the patriarchal models with which they were familiar."[30] As a consequence, the missionaries tried to fend off the foreign gender system by discursively connecting the female shamans and the male shamans dressed up and behaving as women with the devil and witchcraft. Thus, the Christian missionaries were able to combat the female-led spiritual system they encountered in the Philippines by introducing new representations that led to alternative performances.

In other countries of the Global South, one also encounters examples of structuring society in a way that is not familiar to our way of perceiving the world through gender binaries and via male superiority. In decolonial feminist studies, one finds various examples of alternatives to hetero-normativity and heteropatriarchy.[31] Alternative forms of representation included, for example, nongendered egalitarianism[32] in the Nigerian Yoruba society, an egalitarianism that was overturned by the "invention of women"[33] in the wake of colonization. But there were also forms of gynecratic egalitarianism[34]—for example in many Native American tribes

[28] Brewer, "*Baylan*, *Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy." For a contemporary hybrid reading of those Shaman traditions in dialogue with feminist Christian perspectives by autochthonous groups in the Philippines see Agnes Brazal, "Female Image of God and Women's Leadership in Ciudad Mistica de Dios," *Concilium* 59, no. 1 (2018): 83–91.

[29] Brewer, "*Baylan*, *Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy," 10, 13.

[30] Brewer, "*Baylan*, *Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy," 6.

[31] See, for example, Lugones, "Heterosexualism."

[32] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 196–198.

[33] Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[34] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 196, 198–201.

where "the primary potency in the universe was female,"[35] expressed by different female spiritual powers so that "no thing is sacred . . . without [the] blessing, [the] thinking [of this female potency]."[36] When Christian missionaries and colonizers encountered those tribes, they took action against their conceptions of the world. "Replacing this gynecratic spiritual plurality with one supreme male being as Christianity did, was crucial in subduing the tribes."[37] Different discursive and performative strategies helped the colonizers transform the "Indian tribes from egalitarian and gynecratic to hierarchical and patriarchal."[38] Often native males were used as allies to transform the gender roles as they—in contrast to women of color—profited from the Western patriarchal system built on binary gender codes.[39]

But not only gender roles differed from Western norms, sexual orientation was much more diverse in countries of the Global South as well. One can find many instances of different forms of accepted homosexual behavior—which was of course identified with different terms—for example in precolonial Africa[40] or in Native American tribes.[41] The colonial encounters were a decisive force in helping to introduce homophobia, even by way of legislature.[42] So it is through contact with Western colonizers and missionaries that the colonized's attitudes toward

[35] Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Open Road Media, 1986), 26.
[36] Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 13.
[37] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 199.
[38] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 199.
[39] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 197; Brewer, "*Baylan*, *Asog*, Transvestism, and Sodomy," 22.
[40] Sylvia Tamale, "Mythos gegen Menschenwürde," February 11, 2015, *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, www.boell.de/de/2015/02/11/mythos-gegen-menschenwuerde; Day, "Decolonial Homophobia."
[41] Lugones, "Heterosexualism," 200.
[42] Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 84, 86. "The [decolonial homophobia] argument ignores how diverse sexualities are indigenous and homophobia is colonial. . . . Previously, many societies colonized by the British tolerated or socially incorporated sexual diversity . . . No African societies have 'singled out same-sex relations as sinful . . . except where Christianity and Islam have been adopted.'" Day, "Decolonial Homophobia," 84.

sexual orientation changed. Interestingly, the same is true for Islamic cultures and their encounters with Western forms of knowledge.[43]

Thus, one faces a paradoxical situation when appealing to the unity of the world church in an effort to prevent a change of theological positions in regard to women, gender, and sexuality. Representations of gender and sexuality that have been discursively constructed in Western Christian societies were exported to other parts of the world during colonial times, often replacing and making invisible alternative forms of representation that were more diverse and more egalitarian. Those exported norms paradoxically come back in the present as allegedly original non-Western traditions and are used as an argument to forestall changes to the official teachings of the church about women, gender, and sexual orientation. So, efforts to redefine and describe the status of women, along with gender-diverse and LGBTQIA+ individuals, in more appropriate terms in the present are combated by importing purportedly non-Western arguments. But these very arguments are rooted in the colonial dissemination of biased Western gender representations in the past.[44] It is therefore high time to look at ethical questions concerning women, gender, and LGBTQIA+ issues in a more differentiated way in the church. This is all the more important in light of the fact that those persons still suffer discrimination—also due to colonial histories, as was shown above. Their rights are not respected in a lot of countries in the world—not only in the Global South, but also in some European countries and parts of the United States. The inhuman treatment of those persons is supported by discourse strategies of the church.

[43] Thomas Bauer, "Islam und 'Homosexualität,'" in *Religion und Homosexualität*, ed. T. Bauer, B. Höcker, W. Homolka, K. Mertes, and J. Feddersen (Wallstein Verlag, 2013), 56–70.

[44] Thus, traditional gender roles and expectations concerning sexual orientation do not seem to be as unquestionable as arguments based on natural law want to make us believe.

Alternative Perspectives on and in the Church: Trying to Make Visible the Unseen

From the very beginning, the Christian faith spreading over different parts of the world has generated a tension between universality and particularity—a tension that is closely linked to the question of unity and plurality within the church, as well as with the question of normativity. When it comes to ethical questions, the tension of universality and particularity becomes even more challenging. Is it still possible to base ethics on universal norms, or are cultures too particular to find a common universal basis? Can the universal norm be anything more than an abstract principle? And how is translation between cultures possible? How does one or can one handle divergent ethical principles within the Christian community? However, with an awareness of the social constructedness of traditions and insights from post-/decolonial, feminist, and critical whiteness studies, the challenges for intercultural ethics turn out to be even more complex: How is it possible to tackle the question of power imbalances in representation processes in the church?[45] And how does a greater awareness about privileges, active ignorance, and blind spots affect ethical decision-making? The church cannot escape its complex histories of colonial entanglements. Therefore, the question of coloniality is not only intricate when it comes to understanding the identity of the church as a worldwide community, but also when ethical questions have to be dealt with and answered within society or the church.

One concrete example in which the question of unity and differences becomes particularly challenging is when the unity of the world church is used as an argument to preserve the status quo and to protect active ignorance. This has been discussed in this article by referring to the question of women in the church, of the role of gender and the status of

[45] For the problem of representation in social ethics, see Katja Winkler, "Reflexive Repräsentation. Ein postkolonialer Theoriebaustein für die theologische Sozialethik," *Crosscultural Studies of Religion and Theology* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1–22, eplus.uni-salzburg.at/csrt/periodical/titleinfo/8625002.

the LGBTQIA+ community, and by scrutinizing the argument that the official teaching of the church regarding those topics cannot be changed, as it would privilege Western perspectives and offend non-Western parts of the church. Thus, it has been shown that the world church is used as an argument in discourse politics, which is based on a homogenizing system that essentializes and excludes certain inconvenient topics that challenge the status quo. How can these inconvenient issues, however, be represented more adequately in the official discourse of the church? Here postcolonial perspectives can be helpful as they reveal that the cultural context influences our theological knowledge and also that the various cultural contexts are part of complex entangled histories in which power is not equally distributed and which have produced excluded forms of knowledge.[46] Thus, what is necessary is a willingness to decolonize the knowledge of the church by asking new, unusual—even "unorthodox"—questions which, however, are liberating and by bringing in more diverse perspectives. This means reordering power within the church, which is never comfortable, as it implies grappling with the church's guilt in complex, entangled histories and giving up certainties that seem all too reassuring.[47] But this is the only way of bringing to the table all the unsaid and unseen aspects of the ecclesial discourses. Only by paying attention to the privileges on which these discourses are based—privileges which produce momentous blind spots—can we make progress.

Making visible the unseen and hearing the unsaid, however, requires a willingness to deconstruct the various forms of active ignorance within the church, which is also related to the tension between universality and particularity. "When considering the task of decolonising Christian ethics, we are speaking about a particular kind of Christian ethics. The focus is on

[46] This implies reflecting upon "the way we categorize the various voices we do hear. Even if we do welcome a range of perspectives, it is still possible to place them within an imagined hierarchy of knowledge. To put it differently, we might develop a canon (whether in our own minds or on paper) of those essential voices in Christian ethics and then consider others to be optional additions. What patterns shape who we consider to be core or peripheral in our research and teaching?" Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9.

[47] Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 10–11.

the forms of Christian ethics which feign neutrality and presume to offer universal truth. The failure to name one's own context is a refusal to acknowledge both the location and limitations of one's work."[48] An awareness of the embeddedness of the church's way of thinking and the various forms of excluded knowledge on which it rests also means scrutinizing the different official or unofficial canons and their normative implications. Such consciousness also calls for a provincializing of universal and normative claims. "Decolonising is inevitably a destabilising process, and this cannot be denied."[49] It is thus "always a violent event"[50] that challenges the epistemic violence of white Western privileges with the aim of liberation for all.[51]

In the long run, decolonizing knowledge structures and their performative effects in the church means that the church can no longer rely on an unquestionable certainty that the church always succeeds in guaranteeing the Christian identity. The church has to become a question for itself. It must adopt a critical awareness that the church is prone to failing in its mission to safeguard the Christian message. Thus, the church has to recognize that it can jeopardize the Christian identity by embracing an active ignorance that excludes certain forms of knowledge through what is unseen and unsaid.[52] Even if such an alternative perspective on the church and its identity seems disturbing at first sight, it has nevertheless a basis in the tradition of the church itself. The unity of the church, which is used as an argument in ecclesial discourse politics, is one of the four *notae ecclesiae*. Although the *notae ecclesiae*—describing the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic—are understood as identity markers of the church nowadays, their origins lie in a parenetical context—exactly because the church was aware that it is prone to fail to be one, holy, catholic and

[48] Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9.

[49] Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9.

[50] Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 9 referring to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Wilcox (Grove Press, 2007).

[51] Stone, "Can Christian Ethics Be Saved?," 16–18.

[52] Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht;" Rettenbacher, "Zerbrochene Gewissheiten."

apostolic.[53] So the *notae ecclesiae*, or marks of the church, can also be read through their unseen and unsaid excluded knowledge and active ignorance. Unity can obscure factual plurality and differences, the attribute of holiness can fail to be honest about the reality of guilt within the church, catholicity is prone to not being able to communicate and translate the message of the church to all contexts, and apostolicity can ignore the excluded non-male and non-heteronormative pillars of the church that have been expelled from the male-written tradition.

So, it is exactly the *notae ecclesiae* that—far from reassuring Christian identity—lead to the question of the unseen and unsaid at the center of the Christian tradition, its norms and forms of knowledge. An awareness of the unseen, therefore, compels the church to seek all the excluded forms of knowledge that have not fit into the socially constructed, male-written tradition based on certain privileges and on active ignorance. A perspective on the church that is inspired by insights from feminist, post-/decolonial, and critical whiteness studies will pay attention to all the processes of homogenization, reification, universalization, and othering that help to cultivate an attitude of active ignorance by concealing alternative perspectives and forms of knowledge and by silencing other voices.

This silencing of alternative voices points to another dimension of the church tradition that has been excluded and lost over time: The Christian virtue of *parrhesia*—the attitude of naming things openly and freely, as well as speaking up bravely in order to grow together in the community of the church—has been eradicated from the discursive and performative identity constructions of the church.[54] The lost virtue of *parrhesia* goes hand in hand with the suppression of the insight that the church is a limited reality. It is a limited reality both in time—in the sense that from

[53] Sigrid Rettenbacher, "Endlich endlich? Vom Überleben der Kirche im Anerkennen ihrer eigenen Endlichkeit," in *Endlich! Leben und Überleben*, ed. G. M. Hoff (Tyrolia, 2010), 160–192; 177–180.

[54] Stephan Goertz, "Parrhesia. Über den 'Mut zur Wahrheit' (M. Foucault) in der Moraltheologie," in *Verantwortung und Integrität heute. Theologische Ethik unter dem Anspruch der Redlichkeit*, ed. J. Sautermeister (Herder, 2013), 70–86; Rettenbacher, "Worüber man nicht spricht."

an eschatological perspective, the church works on its own extinction and will not be necessary as a sign at the end of time anymore—as well as a limited reality in terms of insight and knowledge.

The awareness of silenced voices and excluded knowledge brings us back to the first witnesses of the resurrected Christ referred to at the beginning of this chapter and their capability to see the so far unseen. When one takes seriously the insights from feminist, post-/decolonial, and critical whiteness studies for an alternative understanding of the church and doing ethics in an intercultural way, one can read Jesus' promise to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29), in a different way that pays attention to the unseen, with all its traumas and vulnerability. This quote is sometimes read as endorsing a blind trust in the church without questioning its identity constructions and forms of knowledge, but "those who have not seen and yet have believed" can also be read in an alternative sense: Believing in the unseen and unsaid—that is, having the capability to see and trust in the relevance of the unseen and silenced aspects in the tradition of the church—can be a blessing. It is a promising resource for better understanding the Good News of the Christian message, which is based on the promise of a good life for all, and not on the active ignorance of some privileged individuals living at the expense of excluded others. Even if the wounds and traumas of exclusion and marginalization are unseen or not yet seen in mainstream theological discourses, believing in their existence makes possible a new way of seeing—a shift in perspective that unveils a new life that truly makes possible the liberation of all.[55] Thus, giving up certainties within the church can lead to a paschal hope that makes possible a new future, opening our eyes to the so far unseen and unperceived.

[55] Sigrid Rettenbacher, "'There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.' Kirchlichkeit des Religionsunterrichts und post-/dekoloniale Perspektiven – eine Erprobung," *Handbuch der Religionen* 85 (2025): 1–23, westarp.de/themenseite/there-is-a-crack-in-everything/.

Sigrid Rettenbacher earned a doctorate in systematic theology at the University of Salzburg. She was one of the first researchers in the German speaking context to include post-/decolonial approaches into systematic theology. After working at different universities (University of Salzburg, University of Innsbruck, Catholic Private University Linz) she is now a researcher and lecturer at the Private University of Education/Diocese of Linz and at the University of Portland. She is chair of the Austrian section of the European Society of Women in Theological Research.