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DECOLONISING THE THEOLOGY CURRICULUM

Colonial Materiality and Durham City's Theological Past

Introduction

- Theology as a discipline remains impeded by its epistemological and ontological silencing of non-white perspectives.
- Interrogating the coloniality of local Christian material artefacts provides one opportunity to challenge such elisions in the curriculum.
- As the Absence/Presence project shows, Durham City and its theological circuits are intimately connected to the slave trade.
- Such important histories could be included in the Theology curriculum through an interactive walk – an intervention that champions decolonial pedagogies.

Coloniality and Materiality

- Religious Studies has neglected decolonial theory, yet the colonial project was deeply theological (An, 2020).
- Material objects elucidate these linkages; since at least the third century, the arts have held an important place in the Christian faith tradition (Havenga, 2021).
- Materiality requires a post-humanist lens that appreciates the cruciality of space, place, and objects in knowledge production (Gravett et al, 2024).
- Through positioning art, sculptures, and buildings as valid theological contributions, we can decentre marginalising histories.

Durham City, the Church, and Slavery

- The Church of England was formative in Britain's exploitation of slaves for economic rewards.
- Given Durham's status as an ecclesiastical centre since the 12th century, its modern development is closely intertwined with the slave trade (Mookherjee, 2022).
- The city is littered with material reminders of this violent past, sidelined in mainstream discourses.



Durham Cathedral

- Many of Durham Cathedral's ecclesiastical landmarks have links to mining and slavery, histories that are unmarked (Mookherjee, 2022).
- E.g., The Bishops' Board features several clergymen who were compensated for their Caribbean plantations after emancipation in 1833.
- E.g., The 1881 Durham Light Infantry memorial neglects its involvement in suppressing Black mutinies (Absence/Presence).
- Most Durham Theology students complete their degree unaware of this colonial materiality.

Absence/Presence: An Intervention

- Absence/Presence is an interactive walk developed by Durham scholars to highlight Durham's Black History through its materiality.
- With 33 stops, this tour of Durham City and Cathedral centres marginalized voices by exploring the historical connections between industry, religion, and slavery.
- If incorporated into the Theology curriculum, it offers to resituate students' learning, challenge exclusionary narratives, and raise awareness about the violence that underlies the City's religious wealth.

Conclusions

- New, challenging pedagogies are required to decolonise Theology.
- Absence/Presence would allow Durham students to visualise the coloniality of Christianity's history in a local context.
- Such initiatives fulfil decolonial theory's demand to challenge the silencing of non-white perspectives.

References

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