

## Was the Pope Francis Really a Postcolonial Pope?: Catholic Decoloniality as an Alternative Interpretative Framework

### Je li papa Franjo uistinu bio postkolonijalni papa? Katolička dekolonijalnost kao alternativni interpretacijski okvir

Piotr Kopic<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

Some observers of the pontificate of the Pope Francis define it as determined by post-colonial critique. However, such opinions carry the risk of a conceptual mess, given that postcolonialism is a wide-term burden with methodological heterogeneity. The Bishop of Rome is being criticised for his utterances, raising hopes in some and doubts in others. In fact, he is the Church's leader who has to balance between vocal and sometimes uncompromising groups of believers who differently define their Catholic faith. The Pope's alleged postcolonialism is one of the strongest causes of such ambiguity. An accurate reading of this teaching needs a confrontation with a summary of a multidisciplinary discussion on postcolonial theory. Putting them together allows one to argue that the label of »postcolonial Pope« corresponds less to this pontificate than the »decolonial Pope«. In other words, the theory of decoloniality seems to be more relevant in explaining Pope Francis' teaching on colonialism and its aftermath. The article aims to argue that Pope Francis is a »decolonial« rather than a »postcolonial«. Even though the difference between the two seems slight, it may cause severe epistemic shortcomings and abuses. The paper applies Walter Mignolo's concept of decoloniality to explain Bergoglio's stance and juxtaposes it with a brief summary of postcolonial theory. Finally, it exemplifies Francis's approach to colonialism/neocolonialism, considering two fields of his teaching: inculturation and ideological colonisation. Literary analysis is the research method used in this article.

*Keywords:* postcolonialism, decoloniality, Pope Francis, inculturation, ideological colonialism, *Querida Amazonia*

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

## Sažetak

Neki promatrači pontifikata pape Franje definiraju ga kao onoga kojega određuje postkolonijalna kritika. Međutim, takva mišljenja sadrže rizik konceptualnog nereda jer je postkolonijalizam širok pojam opterećen metodološkom heterogenošću. Rimski biskup kritiziran je zbog svojih izjava koje kod nekih izazivaju nade, a kod drugih sumnje. Zapravo, on je vođa cjelokupne Crkve i mora balansirati između glasnih i ponekad beskompromisnih skupina vjernika koji različito definiraju svoju katoličku vjeru. Navodni postkolonijalizam pape Franje jedan je od najjačih uzroka takve višeznačnosti. Ispravno čitanje toga učenja zahtijeva suočavanje s osnovom multidisciplinarnе rasprave o postkolonijalnoj teoriji. Njihovo spajanje omogućuje tvrdnju da etiketa pape Franje kao »postkolonijalnog pape« manje odgovara njegovu pontifikatu nego »dekolonijalni papa«. Drugim riječima, teorija dekolonijalnosti čini se relevantnijom pri objašnjavanju učenja pape Franje o kolonijalizmu i njegovim posljedicama.

Cilj članka je argumentirati da je papa Franjo prije »dekolonijalan« nego »postkolonijalan«. Iako se razlika između dvoga čini malom, ona može uzrokovati ozbiljne epistemološke nedostatke i zloporabe. Rad primjenjuje koncept dekolonijalnosti Waltera Mignola kako bi se objasnio Bergoglijev stav te ga se sažeto suprotstavlja postkolonijalnoj teoriji. Konačno, ilustrira se Franjin pristup kolonijalizmu i neokolonijalizmu razmatrajući dva područja njegova učenja: inkulturaciju i ideološku kolonizaciju. Istraživačka metoda korištena u ovom članku je književna analiza.

*Ključne riječi:* postkolonijalizam, dekolonijalnost, papa Franjo, inkulturacija, ideološki kolonijalizam, *Querida Amazonia*

## Introduction

The pontificate of the Pope Francis was sometimes defined as determined by postcolonial critique. Suffice to survey the titles of many articles and books: »The postcolonial Pope«, »Pope Francis – The First Postcolonial Papacy« (Stan Chu Ilo 2023), »Pope Francis in Postcolonial Reality«, which express a conviction that the Pope could be a voice of the postcolonial world. However, such opinions carry the risk of a conceptual misunderstanding, given that postcolonialism is a wide-term burden with methodological heterogeneity.

The Bishop of Rome was being criticised for his utterances, raising hopes in some and doubts in others. In fact, he was the Church's leader who had to balance between vocal and sometimes uncompromising groups of believers who differently define their Catholic faith. The Pope's alleged postcolonialism was one of the strongest factors of such ambiguity. One could be reminded at this point that in many traditional Catholic circles, a memory of the controversies around the statues of Pachamama displayed in the Carmelite Church during the Amazon Synod in 2019 is still vivid. On the other hand, the can-

onisation of Junípero Serra, the first Hispanic American saint from the United States, was hardly acceptable for some native American Catholics (Welizarowicz 2018, 267). These examples are evident in everyday thinking about what postcolonialism means. Nevertheless, other approaches to postcolonial theory are far more inclusive and reach beyond a primary reference, which is the consequence of colonialism's history. When omitted, they could have intensified controversies around Francis' teaching and his image as a »progressive pope.«

So, an accurate reading of this teaching needs a confrontation with a summary of a multidisciplinary discussion on postcolonial theory. Putting them together could allow one to argue that the theory of decoloniality can be more relevant in explaining Pope Francis' teaching on colonialism and its aftermath than the postcolonial theory. One could give at least four overlapping arguments for this contention. First, the postcolonial theory is nowadays a hermeneutic tool to denote the relationships of power's abuse, whether political, or cultural, or epistemic. Insisting that Jorge Bergoglio was the postcolonial Pope may lead one to ascribe to the Pope some ideas that he would have never expressed or accepted. Second, decolonial theory is much less proliferated in theology; nevertheless, it is worth applying to the theological research on the consequences of merging Christianity and Western colonisation down the ages. Third, decoloniality is, in a sense, »safer« than postcolonialism, especially as it is less involved in the Western debate on identity. It has more in common with the term 'de-westernization', and such a set of notions is an interesting instrument to read into Pope's Francis teaching, at least in its part. Fourth, the theory of decoloniality better demonstrates some congruencies with the ecumenical trends. In other words, one can easily find similarities between the Pope's stance on the significance of non-Euro-Atlantic theological patterns and experiences in the global theological agenda and the theological trends within non-Catholic Christian organisations.

The article aims to argue that Pope Francis was a »decolonial« rather than a »postcolonial«. Even though the difference between the two seems slight, it may cause serious epistemic misunderstandings and abuses. The paper applies Walter Mignolo's concept of decoloniality to explain Bergoglio's stance and juxtaposes it with a brief description of postcolonial theory. Finally, it exemplifies Francis's approach to colonialism/postcolonialism, considering two issues of his teaching: inculturation and ideological colonisation.

Literary analysis is the research method used in this article. It will examine selected sources such as scientific articles, newspapers, books chapters, encyclical letters and dissertations. A diversity of literary genres reflects a wide-

ness of the defined issue. The analysis encompasses the sources published after 2000.

## 1. The Critique of the West

In 2020, Danielle Dempsey, a Catholic liberal moral theologian, published her doctoral dissertation entitled »Interrogating Pope Francis: On Gender Theory and Ideological Colonization«. In the interesting and well-planned introduction, Dempsey expressed her disappointment with Pope Francis's words during the meeting with the delegation of the Polish Bishop Council in Rome in 2016. He stated that: »In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonisation taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is 'gender'. Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonisation are also supported by influential countries. And this is terrible!« (Pope Francis 2016). Such harsh utterances by the Pope on the gender theory were repeated throughout his pontificate; for example, in 2023, in an interview for an Argentinian journal: »Gender ideology, today, is one of the most dangerous ideological colonisations. (...) Why is it dangerous? Because it blurs differences and the value of men and women.« (Mares 2023).

Dempsey wrote that when reading the critique of gender theory by the Pope, she felt »anger, hurt and scholarly fascination« and a wish to take »a scholarly revenge« on him (Dempsey 2020, 1). Her declaration in the very first paragraphs of the dissertation was even more significant as she, in her studies, was linking Catholic moral theology, postcolonial studies and an experience of a person belonging to the category of »peoples of nondominant sexes, genders, and sexualities.« (Dempsey 2020, 3). She also added that, ironically, Francis heads the institution which itself preserves its colonial power (one could add, in terms of Foucault's concept of knowledge-power production).

This reference to the dissertation by a young scholar involved in the reflection on postcolonial and gender theories can clearly demonstrate a wedge driven by Pope Francis – somewhat unintentionally – in the postcolonial theory – and also rather unintentionally – paradoxes stemming from a political entanglement of the word »colonialism«. He identifies an ideological power centre – influential countries – Western by default, which impose or at least promote destructive ideological patterns, removing the foundation of social

life. By this, Pope meant basically marriage and family, which are attacked by a »great enemy« – thus, the theory of gender. Francis added that »they don't destroy it with weapons, but with ideas. It's certain ideological ways of thinking that are destroying it.« (San Martín 2016). It is worth noticing that the accusation mentioned above against influential countries or institutions for promoting destructive or faulty ideas has many siblings, such as the charges against the global financial institutions of economic colonising of most vulnerable regions and countries. In both cases, it is about colonisation, which is ultimately regarded as a way to exercise power in its different dimensions: epistemic, political, cultural, social, etc.

## 2. The Faces of Postcolonialism

If colonialism has many faces, so does postcolonialism. Of course, it would not be possible to present the postcolonial theory thoroughly in the short article's paragraph. Nevertheless, it is worth describing some basic information to explain its conceptual inclusiveness.

Even though postcolonialism arose in the disappointment of the 1970s, when many newly independent countries faced political crises and economic failures, it soon moved beyond this historical context and became a conceptual umbrella for a broad family of social, cultural and political emancipation movements. Nevertheless, this umbrella is extensive and sometimes covers inconsistent approaches and understandings of postcolonialism. A cursory literature survey already raises questions about its scope, values, and way of defining it, demonstrating heterogeneous thinking on and using this term. Several observations can help one order this definitional clutter and shed more light on this heterogeneity. Sri Lankan theologian Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah accentuated that postcolonialism is more than mere theoretical or methodological consideration and encompasses different contextual experiences. »Postcolonialism, it has to be stressed, has a multiplicity of meanings, depending on location. It is seen as an oppositional reading practice and as a way of critiquing the totalising forms of Eurocentric thinking and of reshaping dominant meanings. It is a mental attitude rather than a method, more a subversive stance towards the dominant knowledge than a school of thought (...) It is a critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between idea and power, which lies behind Western theories and learning.« (Sugirtharajah 2003, 15). Bill Ashcroft, in turn, argued that postcolonialism is a sort of methodology in studies on the policies adopted by postcolonial societies to meet the conse-

quences of colonisation or differences among these policies. When tidying up the semantic chaos of the postcolonial definitions, Arif Dirlik distinguished three main aspects to which postcolonialism refers. First is »a literal description of the conditions in formerly colonised societies, in which case the term has concrete referents, as in postcolonial societies or postcolonial intellectuals. Second is »a description of a global condition after the period of colonialism, in which case the usage is somewhat more abstract and less concrete in reference, comparable in its vagueness to the earlier term Third World, for which it is intended as a substitute.« And the third is »a description of a discourse on the above-mentioned conditions that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions.« (Ashcroft 2001, 8).

Another interesting attempt to organise definitions of postcolonialism was made by Marc Taylor, who worked out typologies of its definitions. Taylor offers a list of dyads that juxtapose terms critical to postcolonial theory. The first dyad addresses colonialism and imperialism. It is about historical and essential links between these two. Even though etymologically not congruent, they merge in the shared consciousness when one discovers the consequences of the world's history from the 15th to the middle of the 20th century. This merge reflects many colonialism's definitions, such as the one by Jürgen Osterhammel: »the organised deployment of racialised and gendered constructs for practices of acquiring and maintaining political control over other social groups, settling their lands with new residents, and/or exploiting that land and its peoples through military and administrative occupiers.« (Osterhammel 1996, 22f).

Decolonisation and recolonisation create the second dyad. Both terms marked the historical processes of raising new independent countries from former colonies and their informal economic or political subjugation in which they often find themselves. Recolonisation may be linked to relationships between former metropolitan and colonised countries or international political organisations, economic corporations and independent states. The third dyad juxtaposes neocolonialism and imperialism and thus overlaps the previous one. They both may be regarded as a conceptual summary of the political and economic trends leading to a new subjugation. (Taylor 2004, 42).

The Taylor's typology helps one organise the theory of postcolonialism. However, it also points out to an enlargement of the semantic domain of the term, from historical and political perspectives to each relationship of subjugation causing social exclusion and human suffering. It is thus about dominancy and oppression in the areas such as race, gender, class and so on. When refer-

ring to this shift, Taylor wrote about »the near ubiquity of colonising power.« (Taylor 2004, 45).

### 3. Decoloniality as the Counterpoint of Postcolonialism

Since the 2000s, postcolonialism has its counterpoint. It is about decoloniality, a conceptual movement that arose from the South American historical experiences of resistance against colonialism and its aftermath. The promoters of decoloniality (among them Aníbal Quijano as the »father« of the concept) do not underestimate the conceptual and essential affinity between postcolonialism and decoloniality; nevertheless, they accentuate a distinctiveness of the latter for a more effective confrontation with colonialism's consequences.

Several features of decoloniality distinguish it from postcolonialism. First is the most »perceptible« and refers to the differences in conceptual environment. Walter D. Mignolo, one of the most significant representatives of decoloniality, argues that postcolonialism is more about intellectual deconstruction taking place mainly in language and stemming from French post-structuralism, whereas decoloniality appeals to an existential experience. The second concerns the difference in geographical origin: whereas postcolonial theory was developing in the Western intellectual centres, the concept of decoloniality derives from Latin American traditions. The third feature of decoloniality is rather aetiological and accentuates the difference between decoloniality and decolonization (Burocco 2022). In this respect, Burocco notices that while the theory of decolonization was developing in the Anglo-Saxon research and intellectual circles based on postcolonial studies, the concept of decoloniality stems specifically from the Latin American decolonial intellectual traditions. (Burocco 2022).

Mignolo and Catherine Welsh comprehensively explain the meaning and nature of decolonial thinking, considering it as an unwanted, or rather unplanned, child of modernity. They argue that modernity produced coloniality since the salvationist rhetoric - we could also add to this the idea of progress - was its inherent part. However, coloniality has led to opposite reactions to these colonial projects, eventually becoming another element of modernity. In other words, decoloniality is an antithesis of coloniality, while both are embedded in modernity. Such a Hegelian-like syllogism unveils much more than mere causes of decoloniality. It focuses on the ubiquitous power of the modern episteme and values, the totality of the epistemic, moral and cultural - less - claims of modernity, and, since modernity is the Western phenomenon, of the West. (Welsh and Mignolo 2018, 2).

From this point on, there seems to be not far from Francis's contestation of the Western dominant interpretative discourse, which, in the Pope's opinion, has a tangible expression – it is a progressive and left-wing political idea, overwhelming the cultural changes in the West. Mignolo's theory of decoloniality linking modernity with coloniality and the West provides with an interesting hermeneutical tool (in a sheer methodological meaning) to comprehend Francis's stance on colonialism and its aftermath.

#### 4. Illustrations of the Latin American Approaches to Colonialism

The Latin American tradition contains intrinsic and obvious intellectual associations indissolubly bound with it, such as the theories of dependency or Christ with a rifle on his shoulders depicting the theology of liberation. Not so well-known for an average reader but well-embedded in the Latin postcolonial and decolonial thought is Shakespeare's picture of the relationship between Ariel and Caliban from the play »The Tempest«, which became one of the most significant cultural texts, often employed in the postcolonial studies. (Cholewińska 2015, 98). Ariel and Caliban were »indigenous« dwellers of the island which Prospero, a dethroned prince of Naples with his daughter came to. Both reflected different and antinomian norms and behaviours. Ariel was a spirit rescued by Prospero who symbolized innocence and purity. Caliban, the only »real« dweller of the island, is violent and savage, illustrating cruelty and brutality. A difference between them thus reflected the two opposite views on the native people colonized by the Spanish Kingdom, manifested in the famous discussion between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda: the first argued that native Americans had the same rights and were endowed with the same dignity as Europeans, and the latter claimed that they are rather barbarians unable to rule by themselves. In addition, Sepúlveda accused native Americans of human sacrifice, cannibalism and promiscuity, and thus, he justified Spain's entitlement to conquer. (Quirk 1954, 357f).

The debate between de las Casas and Sepúlveda is regarded as an important point in the emergence of human rights theory. However, the dichotomy of their views is not the only one that refers to Latin American natives. Another is a distinction between a »good« and a »bad« native: the first should be taken care of and included in European civilization; the latter must be conquered and annihilated. (Cholewińska 2015, 93). So, in this way, colonization gained moral legitimacy.

The picture of Ariel and Caliban entered for good into the tradition of Latin American postcolonial and decolonial discourse. But often in reverse – for example, José Rodó, at the beginning of the 20th century, referenced Shakespeare's work in order to depict the features of the two civilizations: Latin American and Anglo-Saxon (mainly the United States). However, in his approach, it is the latter symbolized by Caliban because, as he stated, Anglo-Saxon civilization is driven by egoism, greed, ignorance, and arrogance. It is the civilization of utilitarianism. Instead, Ariel mirrors good, nobleness, sensitivity, and gratuitousness and is the civilization of idealism. To save its cultural and political independence, Latin America must confront the influences of Caliban's civilization of the United States and save its own »Ariel civilization.« (Cholewińska 2015, 93).

Cholewińska continues a survey of the further uses of the symbolic couple from Shakespeare's »Tempest«, paying attention to the changes in attributing the traits of Ariel or Caliban to Latin America. So, unlike José Rodó, Roberto Fernández Retamar thought that it was rather Caliban who should have symbolized an advancing Latin American identity. It is because, as Retamar noticed, Native Americans, just like Caliban, after being conquered by colonizers and after their own languages were destroyed, employ the language of their oppressors against themselves. It is worth noticing that Retamar reverses an arrangement of the relationship among Ariel, Caliban and Prospero (somewhat in accordance with Shakespeare's idea) – Prospero symbolizes a Western colonial metropolis, Caliban represents colonized native people who, nevertheless, are becoming more aware of their origin and identity, and Ariel illustrates the Latin American intellectuals. All in all, Retamar references Shakespeare's story in order to show the growing cultural and epistemic emancipation of Latin American societies (Cholewińska 2015, 93).

Also, Edward Said, whose »Orientalism« is regarded as a founding work of postcolonial theory, (Azim 2001, 237) refers to Shakespeare's story. Palestinian philosopher argued that the interpretation of »the Tempest« helps draw three future scenarios for colonized culture. First, like Ariel, such a culture can be submitted to colonization, and when this submission comes to an end, it is able to return to the primordial condition, just as if this colonialism never occurred. Second, like Caliban, it can accept being colonized; nevertheless, it never foregoes the hopes of liberation. Third, also like Caliban, but in a more violent version, it seeks its pre-colonial roots to rediscover its identity and strive for liberation. (Cholewińska 2015, 99).

Rodo's, Retamar's and Said's readings of the »Tempest« shed more light on Latin American »decolonial« identity – thus, an identity for which self-understanding of colonialization consequences is a decisive factor. Rodo's thinking about the moral superiority of colonized culture over the culture of colonizers is not an exception – such a conviction is well-known in many locations in time and space where cultures and nations were conquered by brutal forces of empires, irrespective of whether these forces of military, economic or epistemic nature. Nevertheless, such models-images can help one better comprehend (especially those from outside Latin American backgrounds) the Pope Francis' »Catholic« decoloniality.

## 5. Between Inculturation and Ideological Colonisation

Francis was the 'criollo' Pope. This nickname was coined by Valentina Napolitano when she referred to the Argentinian Pope's roots. The term »criollo« – she explained - comes from the period of colonisation, and she further added that 'throughout Latin American history, criollos have been both leaders of revolutionary independence movements and extremely conservative' – and she recognised both impulses in Francis. (Hertzler-McCainn 2023).

In fact, it would be almost impossible to imagine Pope Francis' teaching without the term 'colonialism.' »Colonial interest,« (Pope Francis, QA 2020), »cultural colonization« (Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti 2020, 14), »colonisation...of the contempt for the life of the poor« (Pope Francis, QA 2020) – this word appears in most of the Pope's writings. The Pope used this word when referring to the most essential elements in his teaching - an option for the poor, excluded, and those on society's margins. He simultaneously maintained the Catholic doctrine on human sexuality, gender and the family model in his work. This act of balancing, mentioned in the introduction, is particularly evident here. To better understand this presentation, we can arrange Pope's colonial/postcolonial/decolonial reflections around the two keywords representing specific fields: inculturation and ideological neocolonialism. They certainly do not cover all the content referred to as colonialism, but they do help.

### a) Inculturation

Inculturation was discussed in many of the Pope's writings; however, Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* seems to be among the most important. *Querida Amazonia* (QA) hits with its profound reverence for the indigenous

people of Amazonia and affirmation of their culture. The Pope's words recall the intellectual and moral ardour of the Declaration of Belém (1988) and can be regarded as a theological addition to the document produced by scientists and environmentalists who gathered to fight to protect the world's cultural and biological diversity.

Overall, QA brings together the dominants of Pope Francis' pontificate: concern for the poor and excluded, integral ecology and harsh criticism of the economism of the contemporary world order. Francis' text is full of personal tenderness. »The beloved Amazon« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 1) – already the very first words of the Exhortation testify to it. The Pope' dreams of the Amazon region fighting for the rights and dignity of the indigenous people, preserving distinctive cultural riches, protecting natural beauty, and being the place for Christian communities »capable of generous commitment« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 7) speak even louder.

The immediate context of the Pope's writing is the economic exploitation of the Amazonian forest, which entails the destruction of the natural and social environment, causes the humanitarian catastrophe of hundreds of thousands of people and contributes to a series of unwelcome consequences in Latin American countries, such as chaotic urbanisation which is for its part often an illustration of social dystopia (and a realisation of the forecasts by Mike Davis in his »Planet of Slums«). This economic exploitation is indeed a sign of the »colonising interest.« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 9).

Such a modern colonisation mainly affects indigenous people. Pope stated that in the quest for profit, the world behaves as if they do not exist, and it is the next point of the long colonial history: »Such a history of suffering and contempt does not heal easily. Nor has colonisation ended; in many places, it has been changed, disguised and concealed, while losing none of its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment.« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 16).

The Church was a part of this history in an ambiguous way: many priests and missionaries who brought the Gospel to Amazonia fought for the liberty and dignity of the original people; nevertheless, others advocated the colonisers' interests. Today, the Church must take a theological and moral commitment to protect – comprehensively – Amazonian indigenous communities and to discover and unveil for the world the cultural treasures of these communities.

Pope identified this specific richness of the indigenous cultures. It is, first of all, an exemplification of an organic vision of social life that sociologists have longed for decades. Indigenous people live in what Durkheim denoted as a mechanic solidarity. Even though a simple transposition of such a social

system to modern society would be a pure mirage, these communities can be regarded as a counterexample of modern individualism and the atomisation of well-developed societies. In addition, it is an undefined wisdom of people who know how to live in accordance with nature: »Each distinct group, then, in a vital synthesis with its surroundings, develops its own form of wisdom.« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 32).

Therefore, the indigenous people of Amazonia should be taught, but they also should teach. This two-directional movement and, simultaneously, an exchange of cultural and epistemic gifts takes place in inculturation. The Pope called this inculturation »necessary« and related it to the Tradition of the Church, which manifests God's work in the midst of the people. After reminding his teaching on the cultural dynamism and cultural pluralism through which the Christian faith can express, Francis dwelled on the specific significance of inculturation in regard to Amazonian indigenous people. First, they can teach the technocratic Western world the cultural richness that in the West was covered with centuries of rational-calculable paradigms that manifest the value of a »good life«. It »involves personal, familial, communal and cosmic harmony and finds expression in a communitarian approach to existence, the ability to find joy and fulfilment in an austere and simple life, and a responsible care of nature that preserves resources for future generations.« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 71). Francis added that Amazonia people »know how to be content with little; they enjoy God's little gifts without accumulating great possessions; they do not destroy things needlessly; they care for ecosystems and they recognise that the earth, while serving as a generous source of support for their life, also has a maternal dimension that evokes respect and tender love.« (Pope Francis QA 2020, 71).

Such a respectful and dedicated description of the Amazonian cultural richness precedes Pope's distinction of the two necessary sorts of inculturation: social and spiritual. The first relates to the Church's diaconal activity to challenge socio-economic deprivation of Amazonian people, the latter to a care for a profound and integrated spiritual development. Thus, in the Pope's thinking about inculturation, two dimensions overlap: it is a value that the Church should always pursue and a task that she should take.

## b) Ideological Colonisation

Ideological colonisation is the second keyword of the Pope's approach to colonialism. But surprisingly, Francis used it somehow contrary to a widespread

understanding of postcolonial thought determined by a left-emancipating discourse. The Pope's intention can be better comprehended when juxtaposed with a significant observation by Denise Sprimont, who argues that: »The West views remnants of structural racism as existing passively as opposed to being actively discriminatory. As such, the West, particularly the United States, has shifted the way they interact with African culture from a conscious colonialism to an unconscious colonialism.« (Sprimont 2020, 230). Symptoms of this unconscious colonialism somehow remind us of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonists bringing white man civilisation to the non-Western world, however in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it means a rather dominant left-liberal moral emancipation and rational-scientific stance depreciating spiritual and theological worldviews.

The category of ideological colonisation becomes increasingly popular within a theological criticism of contemporary world. For example, it was fully described in the renowned book »Target Africa: Ideological Neocolonialism in the Twenty-First Century« by Objanuju Ekeocha, the founder of Culture of Life in Africa. And it is somehow peculiar to the Pope Francis. The above-mentioned Dempsey Danielle noticed that the Pope was the first who used it, and it does it frequently (as Dempsey counted, in the years 2015-2020, he employed it thirty-one times, but, interestingly, in most cases verbally, during public speeches; the phrase appeared only twice in the official documents). (Dempsey 2020, 7).

One of the most well-known uses of this phrase is quoted above in the second chapter of the article. Francis overall identified ideological colonisation almost exclusively with the gender theory, which he regarded as a significant factor of changes in the social system's most primordial forms: monogamic marriage as the union between one man and one woman, family based on this monogamic marriage, and biological sex as an essential factor of one's identity. In addition, he viewed gender theory as a concept that provokes a permanent conflict between men and women. So, one could say he diagnosed a universal fight of the sexes as a new »principle« determining the social realm.

Interestingly, Francis mainly addressed his ideological colonisation discourse to audiences from the Global South and East. In his speech to the Catholic families in Manila, Philippines, Pope stated that »the pressures on family life today are many. Here in the Philippines, countless families are still suffering from the effects of natural disasters. The economic situation has caused families to be separated by migration and the search for employment, and financial problems strain many households. While all too many people live in dire poverty, others are caught up in materialism and lifestyles which are

destructive of family life and the most basic demands of Christian morality. These are forms of ideological colonisation. The family is also threatened by growing efforts on the part of some to redefine the very institution of marriage, by relativism, by the culture of the ephemeral, by a lack of openness to life.« (Pope Francis 2015).

This quotation is very specific to Francis' teaching, linking a very strong accent on combatting poverty with an unambiguous contestation of the dominant cultural tendencies in the West (such as a questioning normativity of the nuclear family model, gender theory, epistemic and moral relativism, and so on). All these are here tacitly ascribed to the ideological colonisation of which the Pope was speaking.

One could argue that Francis, through his ideological colonisation discourse, seemed to challenge the two prevailing ideological trends and perpetuated opinions. First, he tore apart a postcolonial cluster of emancipation ideas and movements encompassing the postulates, for example, of sexual/gender identity movements with the movements fighting racism. Second, the Pope changed the historical locus of the Catholic Church in the colonisation discourse when shifting an accent from the role the Church played in colonialism's history (also charged with ambiguity) to the role of defender of the former colonised part of the world against the ideas coming from the former metropolises (again tacitly – the West). The ideological colonialism discourse is, thus, a reversing of the hitherto postcolonial ideological mainstream.

## Conclusion

This article's primary goal was to examine whether Francis was truly the postcolonial Pope or whether his teachings is better understood in terms of the concept of decoloniality. Such a question is only allegedly purely theoretical. Pope Francis' pontificate was confronted with growing epistemic and moral confusion, which is partly caused by processes such as globalization, technocratic culture, and ideological Westernisation. His responses to the challenges of this confusion are perhaps the most fascinating part of his teaching. In his teaching, he went beyond perpetuated narrations, cognitive schemes, and theories, and perhaps this is one of the reasons he was misunderstood and criticized so much.

This is also the case of his unique approach to colonialism and its aftermath. Francis could not be assigned to any of the theoretical systems dwelling on this issue. Certainly, calling him the postcolonial Pope would be a shortcoming, given that postcolonial theory went beyond its primordial historical

conditions and became a conceptual umbrella for the emancipatory discourses at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. Being a socialist or communist Pope for more conservative circles, and a reactionary Pope for some progressive circles, Francis seemed to avoid the marked trails and established views which set contemporary ideological field.

The concept of decoloniality is a chance here. It is not because calling Francis a decolonial Pope would be more appropriate than a postcolonial Pope. Instead, given that the concept of decoloniality is more embedded in a Latin American background and that it recognizes colonizing reproduction of the Western modernity (as Mignolo insists), it appears as a methodological tool that could better explain the teaching of Pope Francis, especially to those who are located in the European cognition. It means that the concept of decoloniality pays attention to the significance of the Pope Francis' origin (which is often referred to, nevertheless rather intuitively) and explains an entanglement of modernity, the West and epistemological hegemony somehow from outside.

It is beyond any discussion that this Western modernity, which still lasts (even though it is denoted as postmodernity or late modernity), is based on the idea of progress (and, as Mignolo claims, salvationist rhetoric), and irrespective of whether we think of economic, cultural or social dimensions, that it still puts itself on the top of the epistemic hierarchy. The paradox of Pope Francis' teaching (though it is a paradox in this Western-modern point of view) is in his rejection of widespread cognitive arrangements and schemes. He really left the Eurocentric or Western-centric locus (though, obviously, nowadays, this locus means something completely different than a hundred years ago) and affirmed the cultures, beliefs and experiences of Christians from all continents. He also really can be regarded as a Catholic leader who was convinced about the world's polycentric future. Both his teachings on inculturation and ideological colonization prove this opinion. So, when viewing from the methodological angle and respecting the paradoxes mentioned above, Francis is the Pope of Catholic decoloniality.

## References

- Ashcroft, Bill. 2001. *Postcolonial Transformation*. London-New York: Routledge.
- Azim, Firdous. 2001. Post-colonial theory. In: Knellwolf Christa, Norris Christopher (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 235-248. Cambridge University Press.
- Burocco, Laura. 2022. Book review: [Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh: »On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis« (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018)]. *Kronos* 48/1. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2022/v48a6>

- Cholewińska, Katarzyna. 2015. Wszyscy jesteśmy Kalibanami: (post)kolonialne wizje latynoamerykańskiego podporządkowania. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska* 40/1: 91-102.
- Dempsey, Danielle. 2020. »Interrogating Pope Francis: On Gender Theory and Ideological Colonization.« Doctoral Dissertation (2 IV 2024), at: [https://escholarship.org/content/qt6743q3gx/qt6743q3gx\\_noSplash\\_24c25875d96a31ca407c366cd7926ce9.pdf?t=qeow8e](https://escholarship.org/content/qt6743q3gx/qt6743q3gx_noSplash_24c25875d96a31ca407c366cd7926ce9.pdf?t=qeow8e) (Accessed 2. IV. 2024).
- Hertzler-McCainn, Aleja. 2023. Injustice and crime: 'Reviewing Pope Francis' apologies for church's role in colonialism. *National Catholic Reporter* (16. III. 2023), at: <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/injustice-and-crime-reviewing-pope-francis-apologies-churchs-role-colonialism> (Accessed 25. IV. 2024).
- Mares, Courtney. 2023. Pope Francis: Gender ideology is 'one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations' today. *Catholic New Agency* (11.III. 2023), at: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253845/pope-francis-gender-ideology-is-one-of-the-most-dangerous-ideological-colonizations-today> (Accessed 25. III. 2024).
- Osterhammel, Jürgen. 1996. *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. Princeton: M. Wiener.
- Pope Francis. 2020. Querida Amazonia. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html#\\_ftn17](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html#_ftn17) (Accessed 2. V. 2024).
- Pope Francis. 2016. Speech during the Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Poland on the Occasion of the XXXI World Youth Day (27 July 2016), at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160727\\_polonia-vescovi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html) (Accessed 15. V. 2024).
- Pope Francis. 2015. Speech during the Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Sri Lanka and Philippines (12-19 January 2015). Meeting with Families, at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150116\\_srilanka-filippine-incontro-famiglie.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150116_srilanka-filippine-incontro-famiglie.html) (Accessed 20. V. 2024).
- Quirk, Robert E. 1954. Some Notes on a Controversial Controversy: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Natural Servitude. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 34: 357-364.
- San Martín, Inés. 2016. Pope calls gender theory a 'global war' against the family.« *Crux* (1.X. 2016), at: <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/10/pope-calls-gender-theory-global-war-family> (Accessed 5. IV. 2024).
- Sprimont, Denise. 2020. Reproductive Aid as a Form of Ideological Neocolonialism: The Injustice of Racist Epistemologies on Reproductive Aid in Africa. *The Franciscan Journal of History* 1: 229-234.
- Stan Chu Ilo. 2023. Pope Francis: the first post-colonial papacy to deliver messages that resonate with Africans.« *The Conversation* (12. III. 2023) at: [://theconversation.com/pope-francis-the-first-post-colonial-papacy-to-deliver-messages-that-resonate-with-africans-201638](https://theconversation.com/pope-francis-the-first-post-colonial-papacy-to-deliver-messages-that-resonate-with-africans-201638).
- Sugirtharajah, Rasiah S. 2003. *Postcolonial Reconfigurations. An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003.

- Taylor, Mark, L. 2004. Spirit and Liberation. Achieving Postcolonial Theology in the United States. In: Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (ed.), *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, 39-66. St Louis: Chalice Press.
- Welizarowicz, Grzegorz. 2018. Junípero Serra's Canonization or Eurocentric Heteronomy. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 53s1: 267-294.
- Welsh, Catherine and Walter D. Mignolo. 2018. *On Decoloniality. Concept, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham-London: Duke University Press.

Language editor: Catherine Stevenson, MA