

***Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education.* By Christine J. Hong. London: Lexington Books. xvi+210 pp. ISBN: 9781498579360. \$100.00 (hardback); also available as eBook (ISBN: 9781498579377. \$45.00)**

Christine Hong's book is an urgent contribution to discussions regarding models and pedagogies of theological education. The sharpness of her necessary critique of current models of theological education in part one is matched only by the creativity and imagination of her constructive proposals for interreligious and intercultural theological education in part two. Without a doubt, this book must become required reading for all graduate students in religion, theology, and/or ministry at seminaries, divinity schools, and college departments in religion or theology.

Dr. Hong does not restrain her criticisms of theological education in the North American context. In part one, she gives numerous supporting arguments, examples, case studies, and anecdotes forcefully demonstrating her thesis: "Despite vocal and public commitments to justice and liberation, institutions of theological education are still ultimately colonial and Christian enterprises" (1). Content delivery, assessment methods, classroom pedagogies, course learning objectives, methods of inquiry, objects of study, and scholarship production are all shaped by Euro-American models. Put more honestly, they remain largely supremacist, settler-colonial projects in White, Christian hegemony. Despite institutions' efforts to be more interreligious and intercultural, 21st-century theological education is merely reproducing the colonial erasure of the histories, communities, peoples, epistemologies, spiritualities, and theologies of Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and religiously minoritized populations.

Hong's book is reminiscent of Willie J. Jennings' *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*; however, she provides a much broader critique and analysis of current models in the context of the interreligious and intercultural classroom. She lambastes models of theological education that prioritize mastery and competency of religions, cultures, and even languages as the primary, formational goal of graduate students. In Hong's view, these learning aims discipline students into being colonial masters themselves, seeking at worst the control and subjugation of peoples, cultures, traditions, and religions, and at best their appropriation. Furthermore, "competency in religious...and even theological education through a dangerously colonial understanding presumes whiteness and Christianity as normative. Any difference is 'other' and therefore expendable or buried in favor of white and Christian ways of knowing and being" (18). Differences are valued as commodities and capital for the profit of the empire that continues to sustain theological education.

Contrary to models of competency and mastery, Hong proposes in chapter one "interreligious and intercultural intelligence" as the goal for students in theological education. This phrase is explained early in the book as a general "way to mark whether or not someone is productive and effective as both a teacher and a learner in spaces of knowledge transmission" (21). It is a way of seeing, feeling, being, and knowing that is utterly at odds with what is considered "intelligent" in Euro-American epistemologies that privilege rote memorization, repetition, and assimilation. Interreligious and intercultural intelligence seeks to remove the teacher-student binary to create an inclusive classroom in which students and teachers pursue justice, communal liberation, and empowerment. It is decolonial, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist. In brief, interreligious and intercultural intelligence is an intellectual *posture* of curiosity,

imagination, justice-oriented critical thinking, and humble modesty that nonetheless requires interreligious and intercultural proficiency and literacy as a baseline.

By the end of the first chapter, one is convinced this book is a gem; but it only improves. Chapter two discusses liberation in the context of colonial systems of education, from which, Hong reminds us, most of us are unable to escape. Nearly every institution of theological education either behaves according to, or is benefitting from, white and Christian supremacy; as educators who take a paycheck from them, we are complicit (43). Consequently, this chapter endeavors to disrupt and bind this supremacy so that liberation may be unbound. Binaries of oppressor/oppressed, belonging/unbelonging in theological education, Christian/non-Christian, Black/White, teacher/student, and more all need to be unbound; simultaneously, notions of American exceptionalism and American-centric syllabi need to be bound up and put away. This chapter offers a section entitled “Unbinding Grading and Assessment” (54-55) that is effectively a preview of the second part of her book, in which she proposes imaginative methods for a decolonial, anticolonial, and anti-capitalist classroom.

Chapter three provides ways to disrupt and subvert White, Christian patriarchy in the classroom. This is an insightful chapter in which one learns that Hong’s proposals, when enacted in unique ways and in various contexts different from hers, may yield messy, often chaotic classrooms. But that is precisely the point: interreligious and intercultural intelligence takes risks with novel pedagogies; the teacher is humble and ready to admit failure, but then learn from it. Theological education has been shaped—no, restrained—by White, Western, and Christian disciplines of formation toward mastery and competency for so long that the decolonial classroom requires navigating uncharted waters. How do assess for interreligious and intercultural intelligence as opposed to competency in this or that religion? Hong provides many examples but is upfront in the beginning that this is not a pedagogy handbook.

The decolonial theological classroom is messy not merely because of novel, untested pedagogies, but because the content explicitly “uncivilizes teaching and learning.” Chapter four illustrates how the teaching of theological education often implicitly, if not explicitly, sustains the myth that Western civilization is at the top of global religious and cultural systems. To uncivilize the classroom is to “intentionally undo the things that seek to give primacy to...particular hierarchies and sets of rights and wrongs regarding people, cultures, religions, and spirituality in the classrooms” (82). Furthermore, this uncivilizing is an anticolonial stance in the classroom that “does not seek to bury history, but uncover it, helping the settler-colonial academy and the church face their complicity in genocidal end epistemic violence; setting loose newly imagined spaces of teaching and learning” (84).

In Part II (chapters five through eight), Hong begins the work of reconstruction. What does the decolonial classroom seeking to cultivate interreligious and intercultural intelligence look like? The chapter titles summarize her reconstructive project best: *reclaim* epistemologies erased by Christian settler-colonialism, *retell* histories and personal narratives as a form of knowledge and intellectual and spiritual formation, *reframe* religious and cultural borders beyond the essentialist boundaries of nations, religions, cultures, and spiritualities, and *restore* genealogies of the intangible to subvert the textual histories written by the victors. Hong employs a word/concept from her Korean background for this project: *woori*, which “is far more than a word that connotes togetherness or possession, it is a word embedded with theological

significance of a singular peoplehood. *Woori* encompasses what it means to cultivate a communal theology that gives birth to a theology of selfhood, *not the other way around*” (101, *emphasis mine*). Hong’s understanding of theological education is contrary to the methods and principles of American individualism and meritocracy.

In these chapters, Hong offers some concrete examples for how to enact “decolonial futuring” in the classroom. From classroom organization to syllabus construction, assessment methods, confrontational dialogue practices, storytelling, listening exercises, and more, we get a sample of the possibilities of Hong’s project. It is decolonial *futures* precisely because of its aspiration: “decolonization means that settler-colonizers leave and leave no trace. It means we give the land back. We are not there yet. Until we are, we take part in the decolonial futuring of theological education through anticolonial practice and commitments” (162). Decolonial futuring requires moving well beyond rote memorization, text-based study, the canon, the traditional written essay or research paper, lectures, and toward alternative approaches inclusive of ways of learning, knowing, and sharing found in diverse and porous religions, cultures, nationalities, and languages, as well as in diverse cognitive, emotional, and mental habits.

One way to understand Hong’s proposal for theological education is through the disabilities and architectural design concept of universal design. A classroom that makes a commitment to decolonial futuring from course content to grading, assessment, and in-class exercises will be a space of liberation, freedom, and empowerment *for all*. The dictum “my liberation is bound up with your liberation” shapes the decolonial classroom. I cannot be free unless you are free, however much a person in power or privilege may deny it. It may seem to those disciplined in White, Western, and Christian ways of knowing that they are being burdened to unlearn their habits of inquiry, research, and writing (of course this is just a temporary step in their process toward liberation); it may produce messy, chaotic classrooms; there may be conflict and disagreement; but in the end the interreligious and intercultural intelligence instilled through a decolonial futuring is *liberative of all* even while it prioritizes the liberation of those minoritized by Whiteness, Christianity, cis hetero-patriarchy, racial capitalism, and settler-colonial logic.

In the conclusion, Hong invites the reader to make a commitment “to the decolonial futuring of theological education through tangible anticolonial work” (169). We do well to listen to her and make that commitment, although how this looks will vary from classroom to classroom and institution to institution. Throughout the book, it becomes clear that Hong’s classrooms are *very diverse*. Educators hailing from predominantly White, Christian, and/or religiously disaffiliated spaces may have to model decolonial futuring more before enacting it; students may be resistant to thinking, learning, and sharing differently. Even in my own experience, for example, I find that while I offer alternative methods of assessments, in my predominantly White classrooms, students stick with the standard written essay. Because of this, decolonial futuring takes place the most in my syllabi, assigned readings, classroom discussion, and the critical questions I pose in assignments.

In any case, I invite theological educators first to read Hong’s book and then to make it a required text for your graduate students. This book is engaging, illuminative, creative, and critical. It has already encouraged me to rethink my own syllabi toward more decolonial futuring.

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