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Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources and Voices

ABSTRACT

With the rise of decoloniality in scholarship, contextual theologians have attempted to critically evaluate theology and its Eurocentric epistemological assumptions. Such an attempt has yet to be seriously embarked upon regarding Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT). Since its academic inception, PLT has been predominantly articulated by two Protestant theologians: Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb. Although these important theologians are the pioneers of PLT, Ateek and Raheb rely on white-Western theological methods, sources and assumptions. Moreover, the two thinkers primarily target a Western audience, which makes their theology less applicable and relevant to Palestinians. As such, PLT has yet to fundamentally reflect on the many Palestinian sources and methods for constructing an indigenous Palestinian theology. Consequently, this article seeks to indigenise PLT. After examining the coloniality within the work of Ateek and Raheb, the article will argue for new methods and sources for developing PLT. This will include: (1) traditional and local Palestinian Christian practices from the Orthodox tradition and (2) concepts within Palestinian popular resistance and consciousness against settler colonialism. These new methods and sources compensate for some of the limitations PLT currently holds and erode its existing Eurocentric

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epistemological assumptions. This article is intended to function as a self-critical endeavour on our own Christian theology of liberation in Palestine and invites other Palestinian and Arab theologians to dialogically develop our theologies in a decolonial and intersectional manner.

Keywords: decoloniality, lived religion, liberation theology, Palestinian theology, Palestinian Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Critical voices within the field of Theology and Religious Studies have been examining the influence of coloniality on the assumptions, methodologies and sources of theological trends within academia and the public sphere.[1] As such, forms of Liberation Theology have also been scrutinised, with some thinkers attempting to identify and confront colonial biases and influences in theologies of liberation (Ward 2017; Sakupapa 2018; Havea 2019; Jorgenson 2019). Such approaches are attempting to decolonise and indigenise theologies of liberation in various contexts around the world. Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) lacks such scrutiny, perhaps because of the small number of Palestinian theologians involved in the discipline and its relatively recent development.

PLT, as articulated by its two major thinkers, Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb, has been instrumental in challenging Zionism's colonial ideology and theology, both Jewish and Christian. In addition, their theology has influenced and inspired trends, movements and individuals within the Palestinian Christian context and elsewhere. However, little critical examination of their work has taken place among Palestinian theologians academically, particularly regarding the influence of coloniality on the theology's construction and articulation. Consequently, this article critically evaluates characteristics of coloniality within PLT. Even if such influences exist in Ateek and Raheb's theology, it does not render their work redundant or superficial. Rather, the illumination of such influences of coloniality can assist the field of PLT in relating its message to the Palestinian population, especially those who suffer most from Israel's abusive policies.

This article argues that PLT carries characteristics of coloniality by primarily targeting a Western audience, using Eurocentric sources and methods and failing to address the intersectionality of Palestinian

oppression. Subsequently, the article suggests two alternative foundations for PLT which disrupt the matrix of coloniality and further indigenise the theology: Palestinian Orthodox traditions and practices, and Palestinian national consciousness and resistance. The article begins with a brief overview of PLT, followed by a critical examination that considers coloniality and ends by providing two alternative approaches. As Palestinian theologians ourselves, we endeavour for this article to be a self-critical reflection on our own theology of liberation in Palestine and invite other Palestinian and Arab theologians to dialogically develop our theologies in a decolonial manner. It should be noted that in many ways, this type of PLT already exists and is practised by numerous Palestinian Christians, both clergy and laity. However, it has yet to be articulated in a systematic manner.

In addition, this article to some extent follows Nur Masalha's attempt to decolonise the methodologies and sources on which liberation theology in Palestine is articulated. He does this by drawing on the work of Palestinian literary critic Edward Said and Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, two internationally acclaimed Palestinian advocates for the Palestinian struggle, and whose work transcends sectarian boundaries and is built from below on popular symbols, identities and memories. Masalha calls this theology a 'civil liberation theology' (Masalha 2012). While decolonising theology is the main theme of this article, it wishes to do so within our distinct Palestinian Christian framework, which also transcends denominational and religious boundaries. As such, it simultaneously holds on to Masalha's decolonial endeavour and Ateek and Raheb's pioneering Christian vocation and spirit.

PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Historical Background

PLT employs the Palestinian experience as the point of departure in its theological reflection. The Palestinian experience becomes the lens of interpretation for scripture and tradition, bringing PLT into the methodology of liberation theology, as noted by Ateek: 'Palestinian liberation theology, as other liberation theologies, begins with its context and takes that context very seriously' (Ateek 2008: preface). Thus, understanding the Palestinian context and experience is crucial for comprehending PLT. Whilst PLT's historical development and the Palestinian context deserve their own study, this article only briefly covers these areas.

The events of the *Nakba* (Arabic for 'catastrophe') constituted the birth of PLT. Over 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their land and prevented from returning home; many were murdered, villages were destroyed and many who remained in Israeli territory were concentrated into areas that Israeli officers called 'ghettos' (Pappe 2011: 18). According to Ateek, the Nakba's 'consequences, repercussions, and ramifications' were what 'Palestinian Liberation theology eventually had to address' (Ateek 2014: 22).

While the Nakba sowed the seeds for Palestinian theologians to nurture a theology of liberation, it was not until the *Naksa* ('setback') in 1967 that PLT emerged with a new sense of urgency. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip 'had enormous consequences for the Christians in these places' (Raheb 1995: 17). Additionally, and more so than the Nakba, Zionists increasingly used religious language to justify the Naksa, compared to previously secular Zionist arguments. As Ateek comments, 'The Holocaust is no longer the great justifier; justification is now in the name of God and the Bible' (Ateek 2017: 36). Simultaneously, Christian Zionism, a theology arguing that the establishment of the State of Israel was a fulfilment of biblical prophecy and the Jewish people possess a distinct covenant with God based on their ethnicity (Smith 2013), increased in worldwide popularity. That is because Israel's expansion in the Naksa seemed to align with Christian Zionism's theology. Many Palestinian Christians found it troubling that their own faith, tradition and scripture were being used to justify their oppression.

Regardless, the First Intifada ('shaking off' or 'uprising' against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza) in 1987–93 marked a turning point for Palestinian Christians, both clergy and laity, who cried out for justice and freedom; it was then that PLT emerged (Ateek 1989; Raheb 1995). During the Intifada, there were numerous demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, and boycotts by Palestinians in protest of Israeli occupation and brutality. Ateek illuminates that 'if the Nakba of 1948 marked the destruction of the Palestinian community, the Intifada of 1987 marked the return to national consciousness; and for the Christian community in particular the return to a more authentic faith and hope in God' (Ateek 2017: 34). The largely non-violent and grassroots movement that characterised the uprising was a powerful counter-narrative against (Christian) Zionism. Additionally, in 1988, several Palestinian Christian leaders signed a statement of support for the Intifada 'calling on their churches and congregations to assist the

resistance efforts' (Robson 2010: 45). Hence, the Palestinian Christian support for the First Intifada provided grounds for a theology of liberation for Palestinians.

However, prior to the First Intifada, PLT was crystallising within a wider movement, Palestinian Contextual Theology (PCT). Already in the 1970s, Palestinian clergy and laity were seeking to engage their faith with the socio-political reality under the umbrella of the Justice and Peace Committee/Jerusalem (Khoury 2019: 17). This initial attempt embraced one of the core elements of contextual theology as defined by Shoki Coe: 'The missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in it' (Coe 1973: 241). In the following decade, several Palestinians started to articulate their theology using their context as a theological source, following Stephen Bevans's observation that 'theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression' (Bevans 1992: 15).

Perhaps, the Al-Liqa' ('the Encounter') Centre, established in 1982, was the leading voice for PCT, issuing documents and statements and generating ecumenical and Christian–Muslim dialogue amongst Palestinians. By doing so, Geries Khoury, the founding director of the Al-Liqa' Centre, attempted to develop a contextual theology which encouraged a 'spirit of national awareness among Palestinian Christians' (Kuruvilla 2014: 10). The following document published by Al-Liqa', entitled 'Theology and The Local Church', showcases PCT's main theological points. Rafiq Khoury describes it is as the 'Magna Carta' of PCT (Koury 2019: 19). The authors of the document write:

> The local church lives under the limitations of time and place, from which she derives her particular characteristics. Theology, in this cultural context, accepts these characteristics with all their diversities and realities, analyzes them, probes their depth and sheds the light of God's word on them so as to discover the call of God to this church here and now, and, in the long run, help the church to discover her identity and real mission at this stage of her earthly life. (Al-Liqa' 1987: 11)

Therefore, PCT focuses on asking questions regarding the Christian faith and Palestinian identity, history, politics, culture, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, justice, human rights and more. In some ways, contextual theology is a synonym for liberation theology, particularly

within Palestinian theology (Kuruvilla 2014). Raheb even prefers to identify himself as a contextual theologian rather than a liberation theologian as he puts more emphasis on the contextual element (Raheb 2014), illuminating the close ties between PCT and PLT. Both Ateek and Raheb were involved in the surfacing of PCT and are considered important and contributing figures within it (Khoury 2019). Indeed, PCT initiatives such as the Al-Liqa' Centre have influenced PLT in several ways and helped launch its movement.

Another influence related to PCT was the indigenisation of Christian clergy. Christian denominations that were established as mission churches in the nineteenth century, such as the Anglicans, Lutherans and Roman Catholics, began to indigenise clergy. One notable appointment was Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, consecrated by Pope John Paul II in 1988 and now referred to as 'The Patriarch of the People' (Habash and Alatar 2020). With Sabbah's appointment, and other indigenous clergymen, the Palestinian Christian voice became more forceful within the Church regarding the political, social and religious reality of Palestinians. It is no coincidence that PCT emerged within the same period and that many of the appointed clergy were active within such a movement.

The indigenisation of clergy linked to PCT influenced PLT greatly. It put Palestinian Christians in positions of leadership, which allowed them to influence more individuals, and it provided them with unique opportunities to advance their ideas. More importantly, it gave local clergy and theologians the freedom to pursue subjects, methodologies and causes that were on their agenda without being afraid of censorship or intimidation. In turn, this fostered the development of a theology that was primarily built on the Palestinian experience rather than other concepts. Furthermore, internal dialogue between such thinkers fuelled and sharpened what was to become PLT.

Theology

The main theological focus of PLT is hermeneutics; PLT seeks to critique Christian Zionism and other forms of colonial theologies that oppress Palestinians. In other words, PLT offers an alternative approach for Palestinians and internationals to interpret the Christian faith through emphasising God's universality and justness. The focus on hermeneutics stems from its political implications on the Palestinian reality; as Raheb notes, 'Hermeneutics is one of the most hazardous and repressive elements in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict' (Raheb 2018).

PLT achieves this by, firstly, offering anecdotal arguments from their own life which expose the violence of Western colonial ideologies and theologies (Ateek 1989; Raheb 2014). Secondly, PLT ascribes Christian Zionism to imperial hermeneutics by analysing theologies through geopolitics. Raheb argues that empires develop an 'Imperial theology': theologies and ideologies which justify their imperialism through religion, since empires cannot survive 'by their military, political, and economic power and might alone' (Raheb 2014: 64). Since Palestine is valuable geopolitically, various foreign powers have sought to occupy it – leading to imperial theologies that subordinate indigenous Palestinians and promote supremacy. Nowadays, this is manifested by the State of Israel and other Western powers, aligning them more with the Roman Empire than the Kingdom of God. Thirdly, Ateek contends that Western-colonial theologies are not Christ-centred and therefore are a contradiction of the Gospel. The Bible must be viewed from the starting point of Christ, as Ateek remarks: 'To understand God, therefore, the Palestinian Christian, like every other Christian, begins with Christ and goes backward to the Old Testament and forward to the New Testament and beyond them' (Ateek 1989: 80). Hence, for PLT, colonial theologies, akin to Christian Zionism, ought to be rejected since they contradict Christ's teachings and mission.

Whilst many of PLT's efforts are directed to criticising these theologies and advocating to international audiences, namely Western Christians, it also offers Palestinian Christians a theology that aligns with their freedom struggle. PLT, along with other liberation theologies, attempts to answer the question of '*Wenak ya Allah?*' ('Where are you God?') not from a theoretical and philosophical effort, but from a biblical, practical and contextual exertion (Raheb 2014: 68). PLT claims to attain this by contextualising the scriptures and Jesus' ministry to the Palestinian experience, and thus Palestinians will realise how God is speaking to them today and working for their liberation (Ateek 1989: 6). Ateek uses passages such as the story of Naboth, the Psalms and the prophets to illustrate God's care for justice and wrath against sin (Ateek 1989: 86–92). These stories are used to convey the central message that God cares for the justice of the Palestinian people, and at the same time despises the sin of Israeli military brutality, occupation, ethnic cleansing and discrimination. Similarly, Raheb draws parallels between the Roman Empire in the first century and the Israeli occupation today, demonstrating the contradictory nature of empires to the Gospel (Raheb 2014: 55, 85–107).

Apart from demonstrating God's identification with Palestinians and care for justice, PLT also perceives the actions of Christ in the first century as the blueprint for Palestinian resistance. The parallels between Jesus of Nazareth and modern-day Palestinians convince PLT that Palestinians ought to follow Christ's political resistance against the Roman Empire. Consequently, PLT adopts a non-violent approach which seeks to reconcile with the enemy and envisions shared, equal and peaceful coexistence with Israeli-Jews.

A good summary of PLT's theology can be found in the 2009 Palestinian Kairos Document, 'A Moment of Truth', composed by several Palestinian Christian clergy and thinkers including Ateek and Raheb:

> In this historic document, we Palestinian Christians declare that the military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity, and that any theology that legitimizes the occupation is far from Christian teachings because true Christian theology is a theology of love and solidarity with the oppressed, a call to justice and equality among peoples. (Kairos 2009: 3)

PLT has influenced Palestinian Christianity greatly and mobilised various initiatives in the Palestinian community. However, since its emergence and development in the 1980s, PLT has generally focused on the aforementioned theological arguments, and the majority of academic texts retrace Ateek's and Raheb's work.

Coloniality and Palestinian Liberation Theology

PLT, as articulated by Ateek and Raheb, seeks to understand theologically the Palestinian Christian experience living under Israeli-Zionist oppression in light of the support it receives from many Western Christians. PLT engages Palestinian faith with the political trends that are influential on the lives of Christians and those around them in historical Palestine. Yet, considering decolonial approaches in theology, PLT has not been sufficiently examined and challenged with respect to the coloniality existing in its construction, articulation and purpose.

Thus, this section illuminates how PLT reproduces certain characteristics of coloniality, which limits its influence on Palestinian audiences. This does not mean PLT is merely a product of coloniality or intentionally supports such developments; rather, the structures and norms of dominance that were developed in the era of colonisation continue to dominate and influence people around the world.

Theology is not exempt to the hegemony of the West, even if it is written by those suffering under colonial power structures and norms. So, being aware of the challenge coloniality possesses, we must question epistemological assumptions and approaches to 'doing' theology – particularly when such theology is meant to depict the experience of, advocate for and empower the weakest in society.

Audience

Centrally, the two Palestinian theologians challenge Zionism, and especially its support among European and North American Protestant Christians. More specifically, they are presenting a hermeneutical counter-argument to Christian Zionism based on biblical exegesis. Therefore, Ateek and Raheb's main audience are not Palestinian Christians themselves, but Christians in the West, whose minds and hearts they seek to change.

On the surface, this theological task is logical. White-Western Christians hold tremendous economic and political power, which may tangibly change the Palestinian context if they are convinced by PLT. Indeed, Ateek and Raheb's work has reached thousands of Western Christians and influenced their theological and political understanding of the situation in historical Palestine. Nevertheless, this attempt to convince Christians abroad has produced a PLT that is developed for white-Western theological intelligentsia, which for the most part is grounded in structures of coloniality. The mere appeal to a Eurocentric audience first indicates the power struggle at play: those suffering from coloniality aim to convince the powerful and privileged in the 'empire' to change. Perhaps the prioritisation of Western audiences (especially academics) over Palestinian audiences in PLT can demonstrate dependency of the 'colonised' towards their 'coloniser', through sustaining the hegemony of white-Western control of theology rather than disrupting it.

Inevitably, this process has distanced Ateek and Raheb's theology from the Palestinian context and people. To target their white-Western audience, Ateek and Raheb use Eurocentric theological methods and sources for understanding, building and articulating their PLT. For example, most of Ateek's published works depend on theological academic literature written by mostly white-Western thinkers (Ateek 1989: chapters 4, 5, 6). The same is true of Raheb's work. Raheb himself admits this: 'I was dancing to the rhythm of European organ music and theology. I wanted to show that I had mastered the tools of European

methodologies' (Raheb 2014: 3). Even when Raheb attempts to distance himself from the West and build a theology that is more indigenous – as he states: 'I am composing notes for the beat of the drums that constitute the main musical instruments in the Middle East. After a long journey in Anglo-Saxon theology, I sense that I have finally landed in the Middle East' – his success is limited (Raheb 2014: 3, 4), for in such attempt, the theological methodology and framework is again based on Euro-American sources.

Frantz Fanon highlights the coloniality of this phenomenon: 'the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His aspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country' (Fanon 1963: 222). Comparably, PLT's attempt to master the tools of European methodologies and dance to the rhythm of European organ music and theology seeps into its work. Some Palestinians might argue that PLT is inspired and articulated overwhelmingly in a Western manner. This does not mean PLT is attempting to give proof of assimilation to the empire, or that Ateek and Raheb's aspiration is Western, but PLT suffers from a complex and problematic psychological relationship with coloniality.

Methods and Sources

Furthermore, PLT's reliance on white-Western (and for the most part male) theological sources reproduces another dimension of coloniality: the hegemonic production of knowledge and exclusion of native knowledge. As aforementioned, Ateek and Raheb predominantly use Western thought or ground their work only on Western epistemology. White-Western-male epistemology seeks to establish itself as objective and universal knowledge, detaching itself from the constraints of its own contextual limitations. Moreover, it forces natives to accept its epistemological framework and sidelines native knowledge (Shihade 2017: 82). Accordingly, Western scholarship is dominant globally. The hegemonic knowledge production is present also in the discipline of theology, attempting to cultivate a universal or objective viewpoint. The 'father' of Black liberation theology, James Cone, shows the hegemony in epistemology in theology as he comments: 'White racist theologians are in charge of defining the nature of the Gospel and of the discipline responsible for explicating it! They who are responsible for the evil of racism also want to tell its victims whether bigotry is a legitimate subject

matter of systematic theology' (Cone 1986: xii–xiv). Jacquelyn Grant similarly expresses that the hegemony of Western theology is 'to do what oppressors always do; it is to define the rules and then solicit others to play the game' (Grant 1989: 200). This holds analogously for coloniality in the Palestinian context. Resultingly, the dependence on white-Western-male sources and methodologies in PLT largely perpetuates the hegemonic knowledge production of the West, or at least does not challenge it.

This usage of materials excludes indigenous sources for articulating a PLT. Whilst PLT reflects theologically on the Palestinian experience and uses it as a hermeneutical tool, it does not use many native materials that can nurture a PLT. By using white-Western sources and ideas in their theology, it prevents Palestinian sources, traditions and thought from being encompassed within PLT. Hence, indigenous epistemology, traditions and practices are ignored, and broadly, the structure of hegemonic knowledge production is maintained. Again, that is not to say that including white-Western-male materials is inherently wrong, but that there is an inappropriate usage of them in PLT, which excludes Palestinian epistemology, tradition and experience. This can only distance the Palestinian people themselves from the theology, instead of relating it to their experience, imagination and language.

Intersectionality

Lastly, PLT maintains colonial structures, frameworks and methodologies through its lack of intersectionality in analysing Palestinian oppression. PLT reflects one dimension of Palestinian oppression, that is, oppression by the West and the Israeli State. However, PLT has not addressed adequately, if at all, other oppressions, including sexism, classism and Islamophobia affecting Palestinians. Thus, PLT has components of elitism. This elitism or class and sex hierarchies were amplified with colonialism, as nineteenth-century colonialists pursued 'the making of bourgeois in Europe' (Cooper and Ann Laura 1997: 2) and the subordination of women (Sinha 1999: 447). This led the intellectual tradition of the West to oppress women and the working class and to be ignorant of their plight and perspective. PLT lacks an intersectional analysis due both to the materials used to construct its theology and to the education received from the West which instils Western values and methodologies – hence demonstrating forms of coloniality and elitism in PLT.

PLT must examine and resist its coloniality to be applicable towards Palestinians. PLT's sources, frameworks, methodologies and audiences must be re-evaluated. Cone highlights the significance of sources, frameworks and methodologies in determining the content of all theologies; as he remarks, 'The sources and norm are presuppositions that determine the questions that are to be asked, as well as the answers that are to be given.' Therefore, 'Black theologians must work to destroy the corruptive influence of white thought by building theology on sources and a norm that are appropriate to the black community' (Cone 1986: 2–3). In the same manner, PLT must develop from Palestinian sources and norms to make its message apposite to Palestinians. PLT, akin to other theologies, ought to epistemically resist the West, through 'a rethinking of knowledge production, methods of research, and inclusion of knowledge that has been marginalized by established fields in Western academic institutions' (Shihade 2017: 82).

Although PLT holds weaknesses and limitations, Ateek and Raheb have been influential and important figures within both Western and Palestinian circles. Ateek faithfully pastored the Saint George Jerusalem Cathedral community (1985–97) during periods of violence, guiding the local church on the turbulent seas of discipleship within oppression (Ateek 2014: 24). Furthermore, Ateek established the Sabeel ('the Way' or 'the Spring') Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem in 1989, which has significantly impacted Palestinian society and become a voice of advocacy. Similarly, Raheb was a pastor, faithfully serving in the Bethlehem Lutheran Christmas Church (1987–2017) during times of violence and occupation. He founded various important entrepreneurial initiatives in Bethlehem, including Dar Al-Nadwa (1995), Dar Al-Kalima University (2006) and Diyar Publishing House (2011), which serves Palestinian society, and continues to be a powerful voice for Palestinians. Nonetheless, PLT must embark on a journey of decoloniality and develop new indigenous methods, sources and voices.

NEW PERESPECTIVES AND SOURCES

After examining how coloniality influences PLT, the following section suggests new approaches, methods and sources for building PLT. We explore two main areas within Palestinian society which can serve as building blocks for PLT: grassroots Palestinian Orthodox practices and traditions, and Palestinian national consciousness and resistance. All serve to challenge the epistemic dominance of coloniality and further indigenise PLT. It must be noted that, firstly, these forms of PLT already

exist within Palestinian Christian society but have not been articulated and systematised academically. Secondly, indigenous sources for a further development of PLT are not limited to lived religion and national consciousness alone, but could also be expanded with art, music, historical consciousness and other aspects of Palestinian local culture.

Grassroot Palestinian Orthodox Practices and Traditions

The Palestinian Christian identity is often a combination of various Christian traditions. For instance, the small minority of Palestinian Protestants are mostly descendants of the larger majority of Palestinian Orthodox, including Ateek's father and Raheb's grandfather. Moreover, within the Latin, Orthodox and other Christian traditions Palestinians can be seen practising other traditions than their own. Lance Laird shows how Palestinian Christians from Latin Churches baptise their children in Orthodox Churches as a part of a unique Palestinian Christian practice associated with Saint George (Laird 2012). Hence, the Palestinian Christian identity is nuanced and fluid, and often grounded in long-standing practices in historical Palestine. However, PLT is articulated in a Western-Protestant manner, failing to articulate a theology that can resonate and reflect the Palestinian Christian context (Robson 2010: 40). Therefore, one aspect of decolonising PLT from its Western-Protestant rhetoric and identity is through cultivating a theology of liberation that uses Palestinian grassroots traditions and practices which contain themes of justice and liberation. By doing so, PLT can better contextualise itself and resonate with Palestinians. This article focuses on Palestinian Orthodox traditions and practices, but there are many more traditions and practices that can be explored.

Although the Orthodox Church had been influenced at times by the Byzantine Empire – and aspects of its theology in various ways – it nevertheless played a key role in the lives of local Christians in the Holy Land for centuries. Thus, over time, some of the Orthodox traditions in Palestine have developed into unique, dynamic and contextual practices, becoming a form of Palestinian Christian expression (Farah 2009). Many of these Palestinian Orthodox traditions contain motifs of liberation and justice which speak to the contemporary reality of Palestinians. One can also observe these themes in other traditional denominations in Palestine such as the Syriac tradition, as illustrated by anthropologist Mark Calder (2017). Many of these denominations do not struggle with identical colonial influences to the extent that Protestant Christians, such as Ateek and Raheb, struggle with them, due to the robust colonial

framing of theology in Protestant theology (Calder 2017: 20). Hence, by drawing on popular and indigenous Palestinian Orthodox sources, we attempt to decolonise PLT's Western-Protestant articulation.[2]

While there are numerous traditions and practices to draw from within the lived religion of Palestinian Orthodox Christians, and various local Palestinian saints represent the struggle for justice, freedom and political reform, few are as renowned as Saint George or 'George of Lydda' – the patron saint of Palestine. Elizabeth Marteijn notes that 'traveling to Palestinian Christian communities, one notices the presence of Saint George nearly everywhere' (Marteijn 2020: 53). Churches are dedicated to George, children are named after him, and icons of Saint George spearing the dragon can be found in and above many Palestinian Christian homes.

Several reasons explain Palestinians' adoration of Saint George. First, Saint George is a local saint: he has a geographical and historical relationship to Palestinians. The comments of Palestinian Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Sebastia Atallah Hanna exemplify the historic and geographic connection of Saint George to Palestinians: 'We take St George as a patron for people living here – and as he was born in historic Palestine' (Knell 2014). This is amplified by the Church holding his remains in the city of Lydda, the city his mother came from (Morgan 2006).[3] Secondly, Saint George's heroism in defeating the dragon and confronting Emperor Diocletian has made him a protector of the household, the sick and the persecuted for Palestinian Christians. Lastly, saints in Orthodox theology hold important significance as they reflect and represent God's image through their holy lives. Orthodox Christians venerate the image of God that manifests itself in a saint as they 'can come to see the divine light in the faces of the saints' (Harrison 2009: 83). Saints are also perceived as examples of holy Christian living and can intercede to the Triune God on behalf of believers. Saint George is one of the most important and venerated saints in the Orthodox Church, exhibited in his name 'The Great Martyr'. Thus, Palestinian Christians (especially Orthodox) treat Saint George with great adoration.

Interestingly, Saint George is also venerated amongst Muslim Palestinians as they associate him with the figure of Al-Khader ('the Green One') (Morgan 2006: 17). For some Muslims, Al-Khader is thought to possess special powers, and he is associated with the mythical companion of Prophet Musa ('Moses'), who instructed the prophet in the Qur'anic story of sura 18:60–82 to perform certain acts that reveal a divine pattern. Furthermore, Al-Khader battles a thousand

demons, which displays similarities to Saint George fighting the dragon. As such, some Palestinian Muslims pray to and show devotion to Saint George in the various monasteries and churches dedicated to him; this is especially prevalent in the city of Lydda and the village of Al-Khader (Morgan 2006: 75).

The interconnectedness of Saint George and Al-Khader is also manifested in common religious practices and understandings among Christians and Muslims in some areas in Palestine. This is especially the case among the laity in both traditions and in popular forms of lived religion. Surprisingly, in the past, a number of Palestinian Muslims even baptised their children in the church dedicated to Saint George in the village of Al-Khader. Lance Laird rightly suggests using the term 'Palestinian religion' to describe these shared practices and concepts, as they are deeply rooted in Palestinian religious culture and do not always have clear boundaries between the religions (Laird 2012: 61–2). These sociological phenomena warrant more research and reflection, but for the purpose of this article, PLT can greatly benefit from the incorporation of saints (particularly Saint George) into its theology, for it may resonate with Palestinians who are not Christians and cuts through religious divides (Bowman 1993).

Moreover, Saint George's veneration amongst Palestinians has assumed new meaning in the context of their oppression by and discrimination under the State of Israel. This correlates with Laird's comment that 'the stories of saints are never linear ... they are frequently refracted through local political and religious conditions' (Laird 2012: 42). Amongst some Palestinians, Saint George is now also a symbol of liberation, justice, perseverance and Palestinian national unity against Israeli oppression. Laird documents this phenomenon in the claims of Al-Khader villagers: 'When the Israelis invaded the village in 1967, they were defeated by Saint George; Saint George appeared, drove the soldiers away and even grabbed the governor by the throat' (Laird 2012: 67). The Saint George monastery in Al-Khader depicts Saint George as a symbol of justice and liberation, spearing the Israeli separation wall with a Palestinian flag on his helmet (see figure 1). Likewise, Marteijn observed similar sentiments amongst Palestinian Orthodox Christians in the village of Taybeh, where it is believed that Saint George 'protects their church from destruction' (Marteijn 2020: 60). Consequently, the new symbols and meanings associated with Saint George cultivate a unique Palestinian Orthodox tradition which PLT can use as a source for theology.

Figure 1 **Photo taken by Elizabeth S. Marteijn, at the old meeting hall of the Saint George monastery in Al-Khader (Marteijn 2020: 61).**

This grassroots theology centres around resisting Israeli oppression, uniting ecumenical and religious sects amongst Palestinians, and establishes the indigeneity of Palestinians and their connection to their land (Marteijn 2020). Moreover, it is rooted in age-long Palestinian practices and traditions and strongly resonates with Palestinians. Saint George's story and identity is an example to follow and an illustration of the liberating good news of the Gospel for Palestinians. Therefore, many people turn to him for prayer, healing, fertility and protection and often name their children after Saint George. Articulating a PLT based on the

Palestinian veneration of Saint George can further decolonise and contextualise its theology. Using native lived religion, PLT can include the voices who are on the margins of scholarship and academic theology, further resisting the matrix of coloniality and expressing the emancipatory and holistic message of Christ.

There are further Palestinian Orthodox traditions and practices which can indigenise PLT, including holidays, pilgrimages, icons and other saints; this theological area requires deeper exploration and contemplation.

Palestinian National Consciousness and Resistance

Alongside Palestinian Orthodox tradition, Palestinian history is another key source for decolonising PLT. If indeed God is active and revealing himself throughout history, then God must also be present in Palestinian history (Cone 1970: 49). The resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit signify the intensification of the ministry of Christ among the marginalised, rather than its decline. Following this logic, we ought to recognise God's active role in Palestinian developments, trends and movements – especially if these correlate with God's identification with oppressed people and his ministry to liberate them. For this reason, among the many elements to wrestle with theologically from Palestinian history, we suggest two concepts from Palestinian national consciousness and resistance that can be considered as Palestinian theological sources for building PLT: *Sumud* and *Intifada*. In fact, we will go as far as to say that these concepts are the Gospel of Liberation in twentieth- and twenty-first-century historical Palestine.[4]

Primarily, sumud ('steadfastness' or 'resolve') is the foundation of most of Palestinian survival and resistance. Contrary to other concepts within liberation movements, ideologies and theologies, sumud is not a heroic act of liberation by those living under oppression, but the firm resilience to never give up despite suffering oppression and experiencing trauma on a daily basis:

> Sumud narratives differ from tragic narratives through their inclusion of an explicit hopefulness. A narrative of sumud recognizes and valorizes the teller's (and by extension the nation's) agency, ability, and capacity in dire circumstances, but it differs from the heroic narrative in that it does not aspire to super-human audacity, and consciously values daily survival rather than glorious battles. (Khalili 2007: 101)

Therefore, the concept of sumud can be demonstrated in simple acts of survival, whether that be working in difficult conditions to provide for one's family, raising one's children with love and care, obtaining an education and acquiring skills or celebrating life through food, music, art and dance (Rijke and van Teeffelen 2014). All these acts constitute the will to survive and live a life of dignity despite immense challenges, oppression and violence. This is particularly the case when such acts are done for one's family, friends and community. The uniqueness of sumud is also its inclusive feature, for all segments of society – men and women, old and young, poor and rich, in Palestine and in the diaspora – can identify with and actively pursue it.

Furthermore, these mere acts that help Palestinians survive, exhibited by their sumud, is the ultimate form of resistance. In the context of harsh military and governmental oppression that attempts to control and ethnically cleanse Palestinians and interrupts every aspect of life, their continued existence is the most powerful resistance. It is a choice many Palestinians make, to live a difficult life in one's homeland despite the challenges: 'sumud is watching your home turned into a prison. You, samid ('a steadfast one'), choose to stay in that prison, because it is your home, and because you fear that if you leave, your jailer will not allow you to return' (Shehadeh 1982: viii). Palestinian leaders, activists and poets have used this term to inspire themselves and others to continue living in Palestine.

By exercising sumud, this popular form of resistance empowers oppressed individuals and communities to affirm their humanity in a context that categorises them as subhuman. The concept of sumud can also be understood as the message of the Gospel of Liberation, which is manifested in Christ's life and ministry: the marginalised are affirmed as the beloved and children of God. The Gospel strengthens and empowers those who are considered subhuman by society, as demonstrated by Christ's care for lepers, shepherds, women, Samaritans and all those living under Roman and religious oppression. In addition, sumud and the Gospel do not demand heroic acts from those experiencing daily injustices, rather, Christ calls for obedience through loving thy neighbour and caring for the hungry, thirsty, naked and sick. These acts of charity and kindness under difficult circumstances affirm the dignity, humanity and agency of the oppressed.

Moreover, PLT can consider Christ the ultimate samid, the Steadfast One, as expressed by his steadfastness during his journey of the cross. Despite the obstacles, challenges and oppression that he personally

experienced, he continued to minister, teach, heal and provide for others. Even when persecuted by the religious and Roman authorities he never gave up and paid the ultimate price of torture and death. As such, when Christ commands his followers to 'take up his cross and follow me' (Matthew 16: 24, RSV), he is calling them to embrace sumud: resist the authorities and be faithful to God's Kingdom even if it means choosing the harder path in life, being punished daily or dying. Correspondingly, sumud can be understood as following Christ's teachings in the Palestinian context. Thus, the concept of sumud demonstrates how theological sources can be rooted in Palestinian history.

The second concept which PLT can use as a theological source and manifestation of the Gospel in Palestine is the Intifada, that is, actively and forcefully shaking off Israeli military occupation and oppression. If sumud is a concept of steadfastness and survival as a form of resistance, intifada is a proactive form of resistance. It refuses to normalise and tolerate injustices against Palestinians and intentionally works to overthrow them. In many ways, intifada is a robust expression of anger and frustration of Palestinians who seek liberation.[5]

Intifada is a communal form of Palestinian resistance and uprising, as opposed to sumud, which can be an individual decision. In its purest form in the 1980s, intifada was a communal effort to boycott Israeli taxes and products and display civil disobedience. Palestinians in the 1980s also sought to establish their own independent institutional structures that were separate from the Israeli authority (Meghdessian 1998: 40). Palestinian civil society generally embraced this form of organisation and resistance in the 1980s, using a range of networks, unions and communities. In fact, the concept of intifada, like sumud, is one of inclusivity, incorporating both Muslims and Christians, working class and middle class, men and women, urban and rural.

Intifada can be understood as a form of renewing the struggle for freedom: 'the uprising was the crucible in which the political "birth" of their generation – and, by extension, the "rebirth" of the nation as a whole – took place ... intifada stories are also [individual] stories of one's own political awakening' (Collins 2004: 24). This individual and collective rebirth, which is passed on through generations, is captured in Palestinian literature. Writers depict intifada as Palestinians looking into the eyes of their Israeli oppressors and saying 'enough is enough':

> you said you have had enough and started an earthquake ...
> occupation officers have hit a stone, been struck by the steadfast

hardness of a people willing to die on their feet rather than live on their knees
you love your lives enough to struggle against the constraints
bound, as you have been all your lives
you are loosening the bonds now casting off what has kept you down
you are bound for glory shaking, shaking until you are free.

And

We are the voice of the people
The sharpened sword of revolution
We say no, no voice will sound
Over the voice of the Intifada. (Meghdessian 1998: 42, 43)

These are just two examples of numerous poems describing the spirit of the intifada, an artistic expression used to inspire Palestinians to reject subhuman treatment and to struggle for their liberation.

Both intifada and the Gospel as manifested in Christ seek to liberate the oppressed, marginalised and weak. Intifada promotes Palestinian freedom amidst Israeli domination, occupation and prison. Christ, who continues to minister in our contexts, is working to empower and liberate every Palestinian suffering from settler colonialism, racism and Jewish supremacy – from the river to the sea or in the diaspora.

Furthermore, the concept of intifada is understood by Palestinians as a form of awakening and rebirth, from passiveness to activism and from captivity to freedom. Similarly, the Gospel also transforms people to live in a new creation: 'no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again' (John 3: 3, NIV), and 'if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!' (2 Corinthians 5: 17, NIV). And this new creation corresponds with Christ's vocation to liberate those living under oppression (Luke 4: 18–19). Though theological engagement with intifada and sumud is not a new trend in PLT, Ateek and Raheb approached it as a political event or social concept in their academic work, not as a theological concept. They have expressed their approval of the non-violent approaches in the First Intifada and its coincidence with biblical principles but have not claimed that it is the message of the Gospel of liberation in Palestine today (Ateek 1989: 44–8 and Raheb 1995: 27–8).

CONCLUSION

Decolonising and indigenising theology are difficult tasks, particularly as we too are influenced and affected by coloniality and its epistemic and

academic dominance. Indeed, our own limitations need to be recognised, including our privilege that allows us to write this very article, which is in English and not Arabic. Nevertheless, as Palestinians and Arab theologians living in the Middle East, we ought to challenge the hegemonic powers that dictate the epistemic and methodological norms of 'doing' theology. Palestinians have a rich and colourful tradition, culture and history to draw upon and do not need to depend on white-Western-male theological production. Nor do Palestinian and Arab theologians need constantly to attempt to impress and please North American and European theological circles. It is time we look internally, encourage dialogue amongst ourselves, and create safe spaces to do so. As Palestinians, our theology cannot be primarily an advocacy tool for changing the minds of Christians abroad. Rather, it should be a powerful spirit that empowers the 'least of these' in our own context.

Decolonising and indigenising PLT may also open new avenues for Christian–Muslim dialogue in the Middle East. Liberation Theology carries with it strong Christian language and terminology that is often hard to translate to other traditions. Therefore, a PLT that is more contextually 'Palestinian' may assist us in communicating the liberative message of the Gospel to our Palestinian Muslim brothers and sisters. It allows us to centre interreligious dialogue around tangible topics such as political and social events, oppression of the marginalised and the empowerment and development of Palestinian communities. Furthermore, it would invite excluded Palestinian audiences that are largely ignored by academic and clerical initiatives.

When we reflect on Ateek, Raheb and PLT's development and impact, undoubtedly PLT has greatly aided the Palestinian Church, guiding us on our journey for liberation. However, currently it is not clear that PLT can lead Palestinians to the changes needed. Important as PLT is, it must go further in aiding Palestinians, both spiritually and politically, to overcome contemporary problems rampant in the Palestinian community. Palestinians ought to build on the strengths of PLT, but also go beyond our forebearers' work, expanding PLT's scope and tackling the struggle for freedom in greater depth. Hence, new methods, sources and voices need to be introduced in PLT, and dialogue with other oppressed communities globally needs to be increased. Together, we must celebrate our identity and heritage through theological reflection and a political commitment to the oppressed.

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NOTES

1 Here we follow the definition of coloniality developed by Walter Mignolo, who builds on Aníbal Quijano: 'Coloniality refers to a matrix for management and control of the economy, authority, knowledge, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity' (Mignolo 2012: 24–5). The difference between coloniality and colonialism is helpfully explained by Santiago Slabodsky: colonialism 'refers to the traditional political, social, and economical domination of one political entity over another', while coloniality refers 'to the long-standing patterns of domination that emerged as a result of the stratifications employed during colonialism' (Slabodsky 2014: 36).

2 This has also been argued by Samuel Munayer in a Bachelor of Arts thesis, 'The Incorporation of Palestinian Orthodox Traditions into Palestinian Liberation Theology' (Durham University, 2021).

3 The current church structure was built with the help of the authors' family (Munayer) and the Habash family. Both families are old Christian families in the city of Lydda.

4 This has also been argued in a Master's thesis by John Munayer, 'Liberation Theology in Dialogue: Palestinian Liberation Theology Engaging with Black Liberation Theology' (VU University Amsterdam, 2021).

5 We are treating intifada as a non-violent concept here rather than an event or a period in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

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