

The GlobalChurch Project

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Vítor Westhelle – Listening attentively to prophetic postcolonial voices and to our scandalous God

College and University Class Resource

This resource is designed to help your classroom discussion. It has specific application questions appropriate to local church ministry contexts. Questions are ideal for paired discussions, group-forum style discussions, and personal reflective responses. Consider using a discussion method most suitable to your classroom setting. Select questions most appropriate to your group. Consider isolating particular themes.

Materials

1. Video: Vítor Westhelle, 37 minutes.
2. Theme: Listening attentively to prophetic postcolonial voices and to our scandalous God.

Preliminary discussion

1. What were the major themes in Westhelle's responses?
2. How does Westhelle describe postcolonial theology?
3. Discuss the difficulties of the content. What was difficult to understand? Was there anything you would like to clarify with the group?
4. Theological method: How is Westhelle's theology informed and shaped by his practical ministry? What approaches does he take in understanding God in the context of his day-to-day experiences?

Explore and apply

Consider isolating a particular theme of interest for your classroom discussion. You might allocate topics for questions to particular groups or pairs. Or, raise particular questions in a forum style for group responses. Apply the answers to these questions in your own setting.

1. Westhelle's book "After Heresy" provides an overview of postcolonial theologies. How did the modernist colonial project—and the "logic" of Iberian colonialism—shape the way we do theology and hear and ignore certain theologies?
2. What is postcolonial theology?
3. How did discovery, conquest, colonialism, and contemporary neocolonialism become the seedbed for postcolonial consciousness?

4. What “fissures” developed in the broader European colonial/enlightenment enterprise? What fractures and contradictions emerged internally in the euro-imperialistic project, in theology, philosophy, and socio-political economics?
5. Westhelle speaks of heresy and “after heresy.” “After heresy” holds a double meaning in Westhelle’s work. What does he mean by this phrase?
6. What does the term “subaltern” mean? And, how does postcolonial theology both give the subaltern hope and enable subaltern speech?
7. How can Christian thought be transformed through subaltern theologies, built on a post-colonial hybridity of dissimulation and mimicry?
8. How can postcolonial theology reverse the ongoing hegemony of colonialism through processes of hybridization (“hybrid tactical move”), in which the subaltern transgresses, crosses, and displaces the confines of the margins?
9. How is re-presentation (self-portrait) of subaltern theology different from representation (i.e., proxy)? How does representation as proxy usurp the voice of the subalterns, reducing their desires to the interest of those who voice the representation?
10. Westhelle’s work on postcolonial theology combines narrative theology, process, poetic analysis (such as Gullar and Borges), and postmodern philosophy (building on Habermas, Derrida and Foucault). Westhelle’s study is interdisciplinary – reading from liberation theology, European, and Latin American literature, and biblical studies. Why does he theologize in such a broad and interdisciplinary way?
11. How do the people of God create a new space and voice for subalterns that eliminates the idea of monoculturalism, and allows the multiplicity of hybrid voices to be heard?
12. How does a “postcolonial discourse of transgression” destabilize the hegemonic régime and establish a practical consciousness-raising in subalterns, giving them agency and empowerment?
13. What is the danger that globalization might co-opt postcolonial voices right back into a modality of dominant discourse?
14. In North America, preaching conjures up all kinds of ideas. Some of these are colonial, white, male, and domineering. But Westhelle says that preaching has a key role in postcolonial theology and liberation. How does he explain the role of preaching?
15. Why isn’t God the God from above or from below, but from ahead, who walks in a journey with those who suffer from oppression?
16. Does he think that liberation theologians adequately spoke for subalterns? Or, being male and educated in euro-discourse and often based in institutions, did they still engage in representation by proxy and not re-presentation? What’s his take on this criticism of liberation theologians?
17. What is poststructuralist theory, and how does it relate to post-colonial discourse and theology?
18. Turning to Westhelle’s work on a theology of the Cross, he says that the Cross is scandalous because it subverts our expectations of who God should be. How does he explain this idea?
19. How do we, as Christians, evade the sharp challenge that the Cross and suffering love pose to a culture, lifestyle, and economy that avoid suffering and evade love? How do we evade this challenge of the Cross in personal, social, religious, and even theological ways?
20. How can we embrace Jesus’ cross to find our own resurrection?
21. In “The Church Event”, he traces many crises we face in the church to an “ecclesiological deficit,” a lack of serious reflection on the real role of church as an ideal community and an institutional reality. How does he flesh this out for us?
22. How do the Reformers find consensus on what church should mean?
23. What competing historical notions of church emerged after the Reformation, and how do they serve as sources of Protestant religious conviction?
24. How have these notions of the church gradually eroded a sense for what it is the church actually “represents”?
25. How does Westhelle describe a new model of church, grounded in Trinitarian thought, social anthropology, and biblical reflection?

26. How does this notion of the church position Christian communities to deal with the public sphere, religious pluralism, globalization, and communal prayer?
27. How does it claim a space for Protestant Christianity in today's world?

Classroom ministry

Facilitate an opportunity for students to respond to the video in light of the classroom discussion. Consider inviting students to write their responses to the following questions.

1. What is God encouraging our class and me, to do?
2. In response to the issues raised in the video, what are areas I want to ask God for forgiveness in? How do I need to change? What does God want me to stand up for?
3. How do I need God to minister to me and my community, for us to better engage with the contextual issues of our community?
4. How can I gain a better understanding of postcolonial thought? What do we ask that God would do in our hearts?

Prayer

Spend time in prayer over what you've learnt. You may encourage your class to pray for one another. Or, in light of your discussion, you may choose to pray over your class.

Links

Website: www.theglobalchurchproject.com

Book: Graham Hill, *GlobalChurch: Reshaping Our Conversations, Renewing Our Mission, Revitalizing Our Churches* (IVP Academic, 2016)