

**Teaching Theology and Disciplinary Decadence (September 16, 2014) - Joe Drexler-Dreis** (Retrieved May 15, 2016)

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While teaching Christology this summer at **Xavier University of Louisiana**, I asked students to “name” Jesus Christ, to respond to the question Jesus asks in Mark 8:29. To establish the context in which this naming takes place, we watched the 2013 documentary **Let the Fire Burn**. The film shows the process that led up to the city of Philadelphia dropping a bomb on a home that served as the headquarters of the religious-political group **MOVE** on May 13, 1985. The director of the film, Jason Osder, tells the story relying solely on video archives, particularly footage of a commission held shortly after the bombing. At one point during the commission, a reverend questions two police officers why, when they went into a back alley where some MOVE members were trying to escape the burning house, the people chose to go back into the burning house, to then be burned to death. The reverend asks the officers what could possibly have led these people, choosing between a burning house and police officers allegedly asking them to come out, to opt for the burning house. The police officers were only able to refer to the irrationality of MOVE members.

One of the ways we interpreted the logic evident in the bombing of MOVE, which indicates a set of hierarchies that continue to determine the experience of life in the United States, was through the framework of what decolonial theorists call “**coloniality**.” Coloniality refers to the logic embedded within the political process of colonialism, which has yet to disappear despite political decolonization. In the context of what happened to MOVE members in May 1985, the concept of coloniality indicates a concealed set of hierarchies, on which western modernity depends, that make living life unbearable for those outside the benefits of modernity. Thus the choice to return to the burning house.

Students' contributions in their struggle to name Christ are particularly relevant in light of continued police violence in the US, where a black person is killed by police, security guards, or vigilantes **every 28 hours**. As the course progressed, some students became increasingly suspicious of the capability of a theological reflection on Jesus Christ to respond to coloniality. To paraphrase one student's articulation of his suspicion: **"The more we (black US Americans) talk about Christ, the farther we move from understanding the historical situation that we're in."**

The ways black liberation and womanist theologians give meaning to the identity of Jesus Christ convinced many students that Christology could help navigate the relationship between the historical reality and the divine reality. But a few students in each of my courses remained unconvinced. Their persistent critique was that a doctrine of Jesus Christ worked out within the parameters of a Greek philosophical thought system simply didn't provide a sufficient response to the everyday experience of life of black people in the United States.

Immediately after teaching, I participated in the annual conference of the **Caribbean Philosophical Association**. Listening to the keynote lecture by **Lewis R. Gordon** helped me appreciate the depth of the students' critique. Gordon talked about "**disciplinary decadence**," which he defines as:

"the phenomenon of turning away from living thought, which engages reality and recognizes its own limitations, to a deontologized or absolute conception of disciplinary life. The discipline becomes, in solipsistic fashion, the world. And in that world, the main concern is the proper administering of its rules, regulations, or, as Frantz Fanon argued, (self-devouring) methods."

When Gordon talks about "turning away from living thought," this includes turning away from those deemed incapable of thinking. The police officers'

justification of the MOVE members returning to the burning house is an example of this: they attempt to bring others' thought into their own way of thinking so that they can package it in a way that fits their naming of the world. Turning away from thought includes a concealed anthropological distinction between people groups. The discipline, governed by particular people groups, becomes the world, while the ways those relegated outside of the discipline have made sense of the world are left out. The narration of the world, even the world itself, becomes the exclusive domain of those whom the discipline allows in.

Gordon's lecture made me think of the ways disciplinary decadence manifests itself within theology, and how this concept might have helped my students to elaborate on their suspicion that Christology can provide a framework for a response to the lived experience of black US Americans. The concept of disciplinary decadence prompts the question: Does the coloniality embedded within the discipline of theology (i.e., on an epistemic level) allow for a response to police bombing a house full of people, or killing another unarmed black teenager? My intuition, during and after the course, is that we have to continue to work through the nature of the students' suspicion that the implicit anthropological distinctions strongly embedded within the academic discipline of theology disqualify it as an adequate framework from which to respond to our immediate situation. The refusal to engage those who don't neatly fit into the disciplinary boundaries of theology creates a distorted and solipsistic analytical circuit that often reduces theology to faith in a system, rather than, as Gustavo Gutiérrez **defined** theology, critical reflection on historical praxis in light of Christian faith.