Teaching Christian Ethics Beyond Europe and North America: From a Postgraduate Research Seminar to a Theology of Listening

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Presented at the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics 2023

Submitted to *Studies in Christian Ethics*

Abstract (200 words maximum)

This paper explores the process of teaching Christian theological ethics beyond the common focus on European and North American sources. In conversation with moves to decolonise university curricula, the paper offers a proposal of a theology of listening, an example of a research seminar at the University of Aberdeen on Christian ethics beyond Europe and North America, and an exploration of broader challenges for the formation of the theologian.

The paper asks, what can we learn when we give up power and control when doing and learning theology? How can we shift our methods of knowing and practicing theology? We write as theologians from India, Mexico, and the United States living in the United Kingdom. We reflect on forms of exclusion in theological method and formation that arise from colonising, systemic violence, and inequalities. The paper considers intercultural challenges when encountering different methods of reflection on the Christian experience. In a search for a more profoundly theological approach, we propose listening to the other as integral to doing theology. In an intercultural move, we draw on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of listening, proposing that theology must be an advent of voices from beyond our usual places and methods.

Keywords

Christian ethics; decolonising the curriculum; theology; listening; education; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; moral theology

My soul is silent before God. Becoming silent means genuinely not being able to say anything, means feeling as if an alien but beneficent hand is laid upon our lips, telling us to be silent. Being silent means blissfully beholding the one who is yearned for, the beloved, means surrendering oneself entirely, capitulating before the superior power of the other, the wholly other; it means not being ourselves for a moment but rather merely beholding the other, but it also means waiting, specifically for what the other has to say to us. Being silent before God means yielding to God the right to have the first and last word concerning us, and means accepting that word whatever it may be, for all eternity. It means not trying to justify oneself but rather listening to what God might have to say about our justification. Being silent does not mean doing nothing but means breathing in God's will, means tensely listening and being prepared to obey. The hour of silence is an hour of serious responsibility, of being genuinely serious with God and with ourselves, and yet is also always an hour of bliss since it is an hour lived in the calmness of God. My soul becomes silent before God. That means speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.[1]

Introduction

This paper explores the process of learning and doing theology beyond the common focus on European and North American sources. As part of discussions on decolonising university curricula, it reflects on forms of exclusion in theological method and formation that arise from colonising, systemic violence, and inequalities. The paper considers intercultural challenges when encountering different methods of reflection on the Christian experience. In a search for a more profound theological approach, it proposes listening to the other as integral to doing theology, with listening as a practice that connects with silence and lament.

The paper asks, what can we learn when we give up power and control when doing and learning theology? How can we shift our methods of knowing and practicing theology?

This paper explores these questions in three sections: a proposal of a theology of silence and listening, an example of a research seminar at the University of Aberdeen on theological ethics beyond Europe and North America, and an exploration of broader challenges for the formation of the theologian. [2]

We write this paper as authors from different Christian traditions and regions of the world. James Wesly Sam is a theologian teaching in Bishop's College, a Church of North India seminary, studying blindness and hope. Samuel Murillo is a Methodist minister from Mexico, formed as a liberation theologian in Latin America and currently writing on public theologies as a Bonhoeffer scholar. Originally from the United States, Robert Heimburger is

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[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sermon in Barcelona 1928, in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, Clifford J. Green et al. (eds.), trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. 10, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 502.

[2] The authors acknowledge Chi-Tsai HUANG, Shao-Chi KUO, Kwun-Shing WONG, and Chin-Hung YAU, who presented texts in the Aberdeen seminar, alongside regular seminar participants including David CLOUGH, Benjamin NICKA, Jonathan ROESLER, William Carlo SABILLO, Sarah SHIN, Cheuk-Dick SIN. The authors also thank those who responded to the presentation at the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics.

a theologian in the Anglican tradition, lecturing in the United Kingdom. Robert chaired the research seminar with the active participation of James and Samuel as doctoral students.

Though a whole host of literature relates to the themes of decolonising university curricula, theological education, and the doing of theology, only a few publications address decolonising the discipline of Christian ethics, also known as moral theology or theological ethics.[3] One of these comes from Linda Hogan and Kristin Heyer, who discuss Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church, a project of conferences, publications, and support for new scholars. This network is an outstanding example of intercultural listening and one that Hogan and Heyer describe as shaking up power structures.[4] A second comes from Sarah Azaransky, who suggests that North American Christian social ethics can follow the example of three mid-twentieth-century Black American Christian intellectuals, learning the value of international study and connection in bringing about fresh approaches to ethics.[5] Finally, in this journal, David Horrell asks ethical questions about decolonising the parallel discipline of New Testament studies. He proposes that teachers of biblical studies need to present both Euro-American scholarship and scholarship from other continents, highlighting places where scholars are aware of the contextual nature of their concerns but critiquing Euro-American scholars and others who pretend they speak universally when in fact their concerns arise from their local and regional context.[6]

Our article builds on these publications' insights, moving beyond them to focus on teaching and decolonising the Christian ethics curriculum. We also move beyond Horrell's proposal to locate decolonising the curriculum within a Christian call to listen, especially a call to listen to the marginalised other in faithful witness to the kingdom of God.

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[3] Many works discuss 'decolonising theology', beginning with the first work we could find with this title, Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 116. Many others deal with decolonising theological education, like Andrew Picard and Jordyn Rapana's reflection on the education of an indigenous Māori woman and her European supervisor in conversation with Willie James Jennings. Andrew Picard and Jordyn Rapana, '"Let Justice Roll Down": Confronting Injustice in Theological Education for Māori Flourishing', *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468231187787; Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

[4] Linda Hogan and Kristin Heyer, 'Beyond a Northern Paradigm: Catholic Theological Ethics in Global Perspective', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39.1 (2019): p. 37, https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce20193251.

[5] Sarah Azaransky, 'Impossible, Inadequate, and Indispensable: What North American Christian Social Ethics Can Learn from Postcolonial Theory', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37.1 (2017): p. 59, https://doi.org/10.1353/sce.2017.0004.

[6] David G. Horrell, 'The Ethical Challenge of Decolonisation and the Future of New Testament Studies', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36.1 (2023): p. 55, https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468221131276; see also Hannah Malcolm, 'Response to "The Ethical Challenge of Decolonisation and the Future of New Testament Studies"', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36.1 (2023): pp. 58–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468221137666.

Listening as Decolonising Christian Ethics

Listening and the Decolonising Project

As we reflect on a seminar on non-Western theologies, we propose that listening to voices beyond borders forms a way of participating in the ongoing decolonising project. It also provides a way of being in communion with the church universal in its witness in the world today. Here we seek to attend to the impetus to listen as grounded in a call to listen from a God who not only invites but also models listening in the Scriptures. And in what follows, the word listening is not limited to listening to voices, but it includes a willingness and tangible effort to relate, being in communion, building friendship, and becoming a community without erecting excluding boundaries.

In academic settings, decolonising is a form of research, writing, and activism that responds to the challenges emerging from the imperial, hierarchical, and exploitative elements in history as well as in contemporary life. The imprints of colonialism permeate the present in ways that are not always clear and evident, for colonial forces are often hidden, subtle, hard to recognise, and yet they are systemic and pervasive, impeding the life and wellbeing of all creation.[7] Legacies of colonialism often find their expression in acts of exploitation and marginalisation of the other, especially the vulnerable other. This section attempts to reflect on listening, attending to the laments of liberation theologies from across the world about how Euro-American-centred theologies fail to listen to theologies emerging from beyond their borders. Thus, this paper reflects on listening beyond borders as a means for all theologies, especially Euro-American-centred theologies, to move beyond colonial legacies and offer helpful and inclusive discourses amidst current global challenges confronting the world today.

The basic premise of this paper is that colonialism is embedded in the attitude of selective listening, failed listening, and deliberate neglect and indifference to voices of persons who are made vulnerable and exploited. To think about decolonising, it is essential to understand how systemic impediment to listening affects life in the world today. However, colonialism should not be reduced to a geographical category of the (colonial, postcolonial, or neocolonial) West against the rest. Rather, it is an ideology, a philosophy that is attuned to privilege and confers unmerited power in the hands of certain group of people. As reflected in the paper below, it would be a mistake to restrict colonialism to a geographical category. Within Majority World contexts, there are examples of the centralisation of power leading to the exploitation of the vulnerable. For example, in South Asia the caste system and the inhuman discriminatory practices of untouchability emerge from an ideology and philosophy of oppression sanctioned by religion. As part of the endeavour to decolonise, it is important to lament, resist, and move beyond the philosophies and ideologies that sustain and

[7] On the history of religious imposition in colonies in the past and present, see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

perpetuate hegemony, discrimination, and exploitative power that are indifferent to the voices of the vulnerable.

As an offspring of neocolonialism and neo-imperialism, an enclosed and monetarily powerful Euro- and Western-centred Christianity is problematic and evil, and it must be confronted as part of the project of racial justice and decolonising. Miguel A. De La Torre comments, 'Euro-Christianity can be understood as a particular interpretation of Christianity grounded in the rise of empires, spiritually detrimental to all who fall short of whiteness. Unearned global power, privileges, and profit funnelled through military or economic might to a minority segment of the world's population comes to be understood as ordained by God.'[8] There is a strong pushback against the dominance of Eurocentric theologies that are built on the financial clout of Western institutions emerging from non-Western theologians. The book *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, gives expression to the voices from the margins of Western-centred theological discourse.[9] This book bears witness to how the most prominent and popular Western theologies become deeply problematic when they do not account for realities beyond their borders and are done with ignorance and deliberate indifference to the systemic evils prevalent in the society and world at large. Thus, seeking racial justice and decolonising Christian ethics requires being conscious of oppressive elements and not siding with oppressive ways of doing theology that fail to listen to voices from beyond the borders of one's nation or region. Listening to voices beyond borders offers the possibility for lament in the very act of doing theology, but listening is not foolproof, and listening itself is political.

Listening is Not Foolproof; Listening is Political

During the seminar on Theological Ethics Beyond Europe and North America, some participants branded theologies that do not fit Western categories as 'not well-formed theologies'. These theologies were seen as not as up to the standard of Western theologies. This way of evaluating theologies traffics in colonialism, in its epistemic privileging and hegemony of a dominant group over others.[10] Such a privileged position of Western theologies is flawed, for it fails to listen to the realities beyond the borders of the Western world. R. S. Sugirtharajah acknowledges the sad truth of this unhelpful divide:

> Generally, the dominant biblical scholarship has shied away from the needs of the weak and the needy. Very rarely has it focused on people's experience of hunger,

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[8] Miguel A. De La Torre, 'Is Ecumenism Even Possible in the Context of World Christianity?' *The Ecumenical Review* 74.1 (2022): p. 58.
[9] Miguel A. De La Torre and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (eds.), *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).
[10] 'The dominant group, in contrast, being blind to its own privilege, has created an epistemic hegemony: an epistemic hegemony that makes it possible for those in the dominant group to ignore or disavow their epistemic privilege.' Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, 'Introduction: Freeing Subjugated Knowledge', in *Decolonising Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy,* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 4.

> sickness, and exploitation … Secondly, it points to the marginalisation of Asian, Latin American, black, and other biblical scholars by main line biblical scholarship.[11]

In the absence of genuine listening, merely offering a space for the presentation and discussion of non-Western theologies does not help rather cause more harm. Listening requires more, according to Gemma Corradi Fiumara: 'This cognitive dedication to the word of the other demands a philosophical methodology that involves the person entirely, since it demands a kind of inner abnegation. Without this inner renunciation the individual can only hold a dialogue with himself.'[12] Listening is more than the ability to have an open ear to the voices from the margins. Listening affects and changes the listener.

Marcella Althaus-Reid in her book *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* narrates her own personal experience of manipulative listening that happened in the form of commodified theological tourism done for the sake of curiosity and producing marketable publications. Althaus-Reid writes, 'They came with notebooks and cameras to take photos, and returned to their countries of origin suntanned, with some traditional shirt from Latin America and notes for a future book to be published on Liberation Theology.'[13] Can such a listening to theologies and voices beyond borders serve the cause of decolonising? What will be a more helpful and liberative way of listening?

To Whom Did We Choose to Become a Neighbour? Listening to Voices from the Margins as a Christian Calling

Joerg Rieger writes, 'In the words of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 12:26), "If one member suffers, all suffer together". This has implications even for those of us who belong to the mainline, and it broadens our horizons.'[14] Listening to voices of suffering from the margins becomes an imperative for doing theology. The act of listening to voices, especially silenced and marginalised voices, plays a central role in the stories of the Bible. Psalm 18:6 says, 'In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears' (NRSV). This psalm is a psalm of David. It is also a cry of despair and a cry for help. Here we see a God who listens to the cry of desperation of a fugitive on the run from a powerful persecutor. In the Bible we see a God who listens especially to the cries of suffering and the persecuted in the Exodus story. The agenda for decolonising ethics and the need to listen to voices emerging from the corners of the world is deeply rooted in the Bible itself. Christians believe in a God who listens, a God who is

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[11] R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction', in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World,* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp. 1, 2.
[12] Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, trans. Charles Lambert (London: Routledge, 1990), 125; see Lisbeth Lipari, 'Listening, Thinking, Being', *Communication Theory* 20.3 (2010): 350, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01366.x.
[13] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 26.
[14] Joerg Rieger, 'Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World', in Joerg Rieger (ed.), *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 180.

especially tuned to the cries of the marginalised and victimised. Listening to neglected and marginalised voices is central to the stories of the Bible.

Jesus' parables necessitate the love of those excluded among us, for which listening to the voices of the other is the starting point. The central plot of the Good Samaritan is about listening. It is about listening to or being indifferent to the cry for help.[15] It is a story where the cries for help fell on ears that chose to ignore and be indifferent to the cries. The story of rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 presents another example of failed listening. The voice from just outside the boundary of the man's household was deliberately ignored. Today there are voices and cries that come not only from beyond the borders but also from one's neighbourhood, which are at best ignored or responded to with indifference because of colonial legacies.

The intentional willingness to listen to the cries emerging from the margins then becomes the starting point for the path to becoming a neighbour resisting pattern of colonisation. The writings of blind British theologian John M. Hull points to the fact that even a genuine attempt to offer help for a person with disabilities results in misunderstanding and embarrassment due to lack of understanding between the world of the blind and the world of the sighted. 'It is these offers of help (without mutual understanding) which really disable me.'[16] Hull emphasises the imperative to understand the experience of the other as an essential ingredient to sharing life on earth. One way of doing this is through listening to the words and experiences of the significant other.

Decolonising Christian Ethics should have its starting point in lament. In lamenting the failure to listen to the voices, one can discover the narrow gate that leads to theologies that are life-affirming for all creation and not only for a privileged few. Lament is a spiritual exercise and a cry addressed to God expressing anguish over injustice and failure. Lamenting the failure and indifference in listening to the other is essential in understanding and discovering new and more helpful ways of listening. Thus, lament and listening become powerful tools for doing theology.

Two of us (James Wesly Sam and Samuel Murillo) come from Majority World contexts. We have been deeply enriched by the scholarship and discussions within the community of the Divinity department at Aberdeen. Understandably, there is a boundary, a theological, philosophical, and epistemological boundary, within which theology is done. However, the perennial lack of urge, motivation, and will to listen to scholarships and voices from beyond boundary of the scholarships identified as Western cannot be justified. Is there a theological, philosophical, or epistemological grounding for creating such a boundary, or is it primarily a boundary erected by power and wealth? This could be explored at another time.

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[15] One may assume that in the Good Samaritan story listening is not the primary player. It might be the sight of the wounded that would have attracted attention not the sound of the cry. In this paper, listening is not limited to the auditory function of hearing, but the emphasis here is on becoming a neighbour with our whole being.
[16] John M. Hull, *On Sight and Insight: A Journey into the World of Blindness* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), p. 131.

This boundary within which scholarship in the West predominantly dwells is problematic, and there are ample voices of lament from scholars from all around the world and especially from non-Western scholarship.[17] Listening is not easy. It is time-consuming, energy-consuming, and resource-consuming, and ultimately it may even consume the very self built on shallow consciousness. In doing theology we are called to listen to the other, especially the vulnerable other not out of any materialistic compulsion nor because it is a fashionable trend in doing theology. We listen to the other, especially to the voice of the vulnerable other, beyond borders because it is a calling deeply rooted in our Christian faith. It is the call and command to love one's neighbour as oneself.[18]

Intercultural Listening in a Research Seminar

What would it look like to listen to voices from other places in the context of theological formation? One of us gathered master's and doctoral students for a research seminar that would explore this question at the University of Aberdeen.

Aberdeen Divinity has a tradition of seminars based around reading one or two texts closely over the course of a term, a pattern that theologian John Webster began when he moved to Aberdeen. These reading seminars are often lively and fruitful, drawing students and teaching staff into a community of learning together through careful attention to texts. In this rich history, we are not aware of another time that a non-Western author had been discussed in Christian ethics seminars at Aberdeen.[19] This is the case despite trends of growing numbers of Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while numbers in Europe and North America stagnate and decline.[20] Also, it is common that when course syllabi and conferences are reorganised to feature diverse voices, that diversity comes from authors residing in Europe or North America who are Black American or Black British, US-based Latinx, Asian American, Native American, or otherwise. Less often are theological texts from Asia, Africa, and Latin America found on course syllabi, and this is what we focused on.

As we gathered with postgraduate students to plan the seminar, we considered reading a single author like Kwame Bediako or Gustavo Gutiérrez or exploring a topic like migration theology in an intercultural way, but a more interesting proposal arose. Each student who wished could present a text by a theologian from their home community. At least one student from another country, possibly from Europe or North America, could provide a response each week. To enhance the participation of those from regions where English is not the dominant language, everyone was encouraged to post comments in written form on an online discussion board on the weekday before the seminar. And the original plan to mention 'the

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[17] For example, see Mitri Raheb and Mark A. Lamport (eds.), *Emerging Theologies from the Global South* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2023).
[18] 'And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Matthew 22:39, NRSV).
[19] This applies for texts from the fifth century and onwards. Texts from the Middle East and North Africa, biblical texts and early church writings by the likes of Augustine, had figured in past seminars.
[20] Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, 'World Christianity and Mission 2020: Ongoing Shift to the Global South', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 44. 1 (2020): pp. 8–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939319880074.

Global South' in the title was nixed; one student argued that this category put the economic and political priorities of a few countries who considered themselves the Global North first, organising the rest of the world around these priorities. We arrived at a title based on continental geography instead, 'Theological Ethics Beyond Europe and North America'.[21]

As students suggested readings by authors from their home regions which they wished to present, we arrived at a list of readings for five weeks:

1. Choan-Seng SONG, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, chap. 5.
2. SONG, *Third-Eye Theology*, chap. 10.
3. Wai-Luen KWOK, 'Reconsidering Public Theology: Involvement of Hong Kong Protestant Christianity in The Occupy Central Movement'.
4. Ignacio ELLACURÍA, 'The Crucified People'.
5. Bernard K. WONG and SONG Jun, 'The Bible and Ethics in Chinese Society'.[22]

This list had its limits: it was not representative of all regions, with its focus on East Asia, and later, students proposed readings by Emmanuel Katongole and Dalit theologian James Massey that there was not space to include. The list did not include female authors, which we lament. However, those limits reflected the interests and choices of the students involved.

As we sought to listen to figures making claims about Christian ethics from beyond Europe and North America, we observed three things. Firstly, the seminar enabled members of the Aberdeen Divinity community to listen to several of the doctoral students from beyond Europe and North America who were already in its midst. Many of these students from East Asia had been regulars at past seminars, but their voices were often at the periphery of the discussion because they were not quick in English, less clued into inside knowledge and references from Europe and North American, and slower to catch on to humour. Here they were front and centre, teaching those participating about efforts to discern what it means to live as a Christian in their contexts. Alongside listening to regular participants, a few students from Asia and with Asian heritage attended the seminar when who had not attended ethics seminars before. This listening took time, both for the European and North American participants and for participants from other non-Western societies. In a two-hour seminar, it often took an hour to understand the background to the material – from struggles for universal suffrage in Hong Kong to the Three Self Patriotic Movement and house churches in

[21] Thanks to Shao-Chi KUO for making this case.
[22] Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), chaps 5, 10; Wai-Luen Kwok, 'Reconsidering Public Theology: Involvement of Hong Kong Protestant Christianity in the Occupy Central Movement', *Journal of Dharma* 40.2 (2015): pp. 169–88; Ignacio Ellacuría, 'The Crucified People', in Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (eds.), *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 257–78; Bernard K. Wong and Song Jun, 'The Bible and Ethics in Chinese Society', in K. K. Yeo (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 641–56.

China. This made us reflect on the value of paying similar attention to the context that Western theologians write out of.

Secondly, the seminar revealed barriers to intercultural listening. Despite increased attendance and stronger participation from non-Western students, very few students from Europe and North America took part in the seminar. Past terms' seminars on the theological ethics of Karl Barth, David Clough, and Jacques Ellul had attracted strong regular attendance from white master's and doctoral students from Europe and North America, both specialists in theological ethics and students of systematic theology and biblical studies. However, only a very small number of white master's or doctoral students attended this seminar regularly. There were other reasons students did not participate that term; some needed to focus on writing, the person supervising many of the student's doctorates was on leave, and many other seminars were offered in the Divinity Department. Still, the absence of white European and North American students raised questions: Do Barth, Clough, and Ellul matter more than Song, Kwok, Wong, and Song? If we had to understand 20th-century Switzerland and Germany to understand Barth, 21st-century Britain to understand Clough, and 20th-century France to understand Ellul, why was understanding the Chinese diaspora of the last two centuries along with Song, Kwok, Wong, and Song considered not worth the effort? These questions are personal for one of us (Robert Heimburger), who made similar decisions to focus on European figures during his theological education and in his first book.[23]

For some students, the answer may be a recovery of tradition: they come to study at the doctoral level to encounter a tradition they have not known well, a tradition they understand themselves as a part of and one that may make up for inadequacies in their churches' inordinate focus on the present.[24] These was the conscious reason that one of us (Robert Heimburger) to focus on European authors as a theology student. And for other students, the answer may be that they need to know the likes of Karl Barth to be hired in institutions where they would like to teach.

But other currents run beneath these motivations. Whether to know a tradition well or to find employment, these motivations cause theology students not to listen to members of the body of Christ from other countries. If clergy and theologians are formed by focusing only on the traditions and authors known in their own context, they fail to enjoy the fullness of being part of the catholic church, present in many nations. They may become captive to the priorities of their own nation-states and fail to see beyond the nationalism that shapes their own context. The theology students of our time need to listen to their brothers and sisters in Christ from other places to avoid imbibing the logics of dominant cultures in their home countries. Particularly if this happens in Europe and North America, then theology students will absorb the thinking of figures who have advantages of wealth and prestige that overlap with colonial power, slave ownership, and ideologies of white supremacy. And if perceived

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[23] Robert W. Heimburger, *God and the 'Illegal Alien': United States Immigration Law and a Theology of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[24] For a contemporary theology of tradition that interacts with decolonial critiques, see Anne M. Carpenter, *Nothing Gained Is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).

needs to study certain figures to get jobs shapes theological education, no longer do the priorities of Christian faith shape theological training, but markets and a sense of scarcity direct that training.

The reasons are varied, but in this historic Scottish university where students come from other continents to listen to Christian voices from Europe and North America, most white European and North American students did not make it a priority to listen to Christian voices from beyond their continents. So long as teachers direct students to study Western figures, so long as hiring committees favour candidates with little acquaintance with non-Western theologies, so long as students cooperate with these pressures, and so long as publishers favour authors from Western institutions, then all are involved in systems that are disfigured and damaged, in structures of sin.[25]

Thirdly, the most significant colonial power for three of the four works we read is Beijing, not Washington, London, or Madrid. Choan-Seng Song, writing in the 1970's, argues that for Taiwanese Christians to participate in God's liberating work, it is all-important that they advocate for Taiwan to take steps toward self-determination from the Beijing Communist government, against Taiwan's Nationalist Party's repressive measures.[26] Wai-Luen Kwok presents Hong Kong Protestant stances for or against civil disobedience in the time of the Occupy Central Movement, a movement that agitated for universal suffrage in 2013–14 when the increasing control of Beijing over Hong Kong loomed on the horizon.[27]

China's position as a contemporary imperial power is most clearly revealed in the reading by Bernard K. Wong and Song Jun. As they present six prominent Chinese Christians and their interpretation of the Bible for ethics, their analysis highlights the degree to which these readers of the Bible adapt their ethics to the priorities of communism, like when Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu, 吳耀宗) and Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting, 丁光訓) read the account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand as pointing toward social reform and the sharing of goods.[28]

Whether Chinese Christians' ethics align with Confucianism is a longer-standing question, write Wong and Song. To some degree, they find in all these authors an alignment with a Confucian ideal of 'inner sageliness and outer kingliness'.[29] This means that the development and cultivation of one's knowledge, thoughts, heart, and person are nested within the cultivation of families and states and the bringing of virtue in the world, according to the early Confucianist text *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*, 大學).[30] As an example from

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[25] Exceptions to the trend of publishers favouring Western-based authors include Orbis Books, Langham Publishing, and some works on Fortress Press.
[26] Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, pp. 219–21.
[27] Kwok, 'Reconsidering Public Theology'; see also *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* (June Pictures, Pandamonium, 2017).
[28] Wong and Song, 'The Bible and Ethics in Chinese Society', pp. 647–52.
[29] Wong and Song, p. 652.
[30] *大学精华版, A Selected Collection of the Great Learning*, Chinese Sages Series (Beijing: Sinolingua, 2006), 7–8; Paul R. Goldin, *Confucianism* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), p. 32.

Wong and Song's survey, Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao, 趙紫宸) affirms this approach by arguing for '"national salvation by character" (*renge jiuguo*, 人格救國)'. For Zhao, only Christian ethics can solve China's problems.[31]

To describe Christian ethics in a Confucian fashion does not simply mean seeking any nation's salvation. Participants in the seminar told us, beyond what Wong and Song write, that in *The Great Learning*, the nation saved by morality and character is not just any nation. It is China. This is a nation which is destined to bring peace to the rest of the world through cultural influence. In *The Great Learning*, the cultivation of knowledge and virtue in self, family, and nation brings virtue to the *Tianxia* (天下), 'all that is under heaven' and at the same time 'all that is under the Son of Heaven', the Chinese emperor.[32] Confucian virtue is not just aimed generically toward building up the world, but in a more precise translation of *Tianxia*, this is the 'world' that is governed by the Chinese emperor as the representative of heaven. And in an account by Ning An, Jo Sharp, and Ian Shaw, Confucian ethics are carried forward by the *Hua* over against the *Yi*, by the Han Chinese (*Hua*) who through the central government civilise ethnic minorities at the fringe (*Yi*). In more recent centuries, Manchurians who had been considered *Yi* became rulers in the Qing Dynasty, and *Hua* came to mean the modern Chinese nation-state in contrast to *Yi* as foreigners, on An, Sharp, and Shaw's account.[33]

This means that as scholars of the Bible and theology align themselves with Confucianism, they align themselves with a movement that, on some accounts, is dedicated to upholding China. These scholars may be aligning themselves with the empire historically ruled by the Son of Heaven, a nation that in some ways is still understood as bringing peace and civilisation to barbarians or foreigners at its periphery. In recent decades, Confucian scholars encounter and perhaps uphold what Jinman Park calls Sinocentrism, the ideology that China is superior morally and politically to other nations.[34] And Xi Jinping is only the latest Chinese president to deploy Confucianism as a way to frame the activities of China's communist government, according to An, Sharp, and Shaw.[35]

This means that pressures on Chinese theologians and biblical scholars run parallel to pressures on Christian figures in other times and places who reckoned with the priorities of empires and strong kingdoms and nations. In Europe, would theologians support the

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[31] Wong and Song, 'The Bible and Ethics in Chinese Society', 647–48, drawing from Zhao Zichen, "Christian Ethics" [in Chinese] 基督教倫理, in *Works of T. C. Chao* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003), 2: pp. 495–496.

[32] *大学精华版, A Selected Collection of the Great Learning*, p. 7.

[33] Ning An, Jo Sharp, and Ian Shaw, 'Towards a Confucian Geopolitics', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11.2 (1 July 2021): 222–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620951354. Some would argue that *Zhongguo*, a name for China sometimes translated 'Middle Kingdom', has ethnocentric overtones, but Luke S. K. Kwong argues convincingly that the term has many meanings through history, only occasionally including a claim of being at the centre of things, Luke S. K. Kwong, 'What's in a Name: Zhongguo (or "Middle Kingdom") Reconsidered', *The Historical Journal* 58.3 (September 2015): 781–804, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X14000570.

[34] Jinman Park, 'Is the Chinese Government's Increase in Development Co-Operation with Africa the Revival of Sinocentrism?', *Geopolitics* 20.3 (3 July 2015): pp. 630–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1048229.

[35] An, Sharp, and Shaw, 'Towards a Confucian Geopolitics', p. 230.

Crusades? Would they uphold the enslavement of Africans and the forced control of other peoples? In recent decades, will American theologians uphold the United States as a bringer of freedom and practitioner of torture in Iraq? Will British theologians uphold Britain as it mistreats the Black and brown descendants of Britain's former colonial subjects through the Windrush scandal and the 'hostile environment' for irregular migrants?[36] The challenges for theologians in the Chinese diaspora are not unique.

Someone who reads Wong and Song could be led to believe that no major Chinese Christian figure from the past two centuries questions Christian ethics' goal of building up of China as a nation. But Wong and Song's survey is not comprehensive. Seminar participants pointed out that Wong and Song's survey does not include any members of house churches or unregistered churches. They simply do not mention Christians who seek to avoid entanglement with the centre of what may be called the Chinese empire, Christians like Wang Mingdao or Wang Yi.[37] Perhaps the pressures of the Chinese government are strong enough that these authors do not even want to mention Chinese house church leaders in their chapter in an Oxford University Press book.

Listening to the Chinese-language authors and students in our seminar revealed this: Decolonising is not only question of the West and the rest, but it is an issue in at least one other part of the world where a colonising centre has subdued and homogenised marginal cultures. As a result, efforts to decolonise the curriculum need to acknowledge multiple centres of imperial power. When Miguel De La Torre argues that Christians must repent of 'Eurochristianity' with its white theology and white Jesuses, he needs to be heard. He may be right that the next step in ecumenism may mean marginalised Christians meet apart from white Christianity. However, simply avoiding Europeans and North Americans will not ensure that colonial powers and colonising instincts are absent.[38] There are other structures of empire and coloniality at work that do not pass through the West. Power centres in Europe and North America determine much of what goes on in a country like Mexico, and in those power centres and formerly colonised countries, theologians must continue to reckon with European and North American empires. However, the power of Beijing is the imperial power that Chinese diaspora theologians must reckon with first today.

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[36] See Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats*, 2nd edn. (London: Verso, 2020); Amelia Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment* (London: Guardian Faber Publishing, 2019); Ian Sanjay Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (London: Verso Books, 2022); Victor Carmona and Robert W. Heimburger, 'The Border, Brexit, and the Church: US Roman Catholic and Church of England Bishops' Teaching on Migration, 2015-2019', *Journal of Moral Theology* 11.2 (2022): pp. 15–44, https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.37340.

[37] See Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2002), 9; Wang Yi, *Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement*, Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng (eds.) (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2022).

[38] De La Torre, 'Is Ecumenism Even Possible?', pp. 58–61, 67–68.

Barriers to Listening in the Formation of Theologians

Having examined the theological challenges around listening and an example of intercultural encounter through a postgraduate research seminar in the United Kingdom, here we reflect on the relevance of listening to voices from other places for the formation of theologians.

It is important to clarify that this paper is not claiming that one place, region, or background in the world is more relevant than another, nor is it diminishing the value of reading scholarship from one's own place. Instead, this paper explores the impact of listening beyond one's background, place, culture, and method for theological reasons and in theological formation. The paper attends to what is too often forgotten in the course of studying specific theologians, the role of intercultural listening in their formation.

Take three examples of listening to voices from other places in the formation of theologians. Ignacio Ellacuría had a solid European theological formation. However, it was his time in El Salvador that radically changed his theological thought, not replacing his previous knowledge but giving it a new form, directed towards liberation and justice.[39] Desmond Tutu is often called the theological father of South Africa, but what is often forgotten is his exposure to theologies from elsewhere as a student in London.[40] The same is the case with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in the Northern Hemisphere is just thought of as a white Lutheran theologian. Reggie Williams clarifies that when Bonhoeffer 'encountered the Black Christ in Harlem who suffered with African Americans in a white supremacist world', this allowed him to see beyond his background, culture, and method, making a theological turn from the abstract to the real.[41] How then can theology students be formed today to respond to voices beyond their background and culture?

In the present theological faculties and religious institutions are and will continue to be more diverse than ever before. The interconnectedness of the world and patterns of migration require new forms of intercultural and interreligious engagement. Theological listening from more than one place, in more than one language, with the tools of theological communication will determine whether someone takes on a fundamentalist, narrowed view community or responds in mutual vulnerability, overcoming a fear of difference and being able to listen beyond one place.

In a similar vein, this third section presents an example of listening interculturally. Here, the one of us who is a Latin American liberation theologian (Samuel Murillo) draws on

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[39] Ignacio Ellacuría was killed by the dictatorship in El Salvador with other Jesuits at the Universidad Centroamericana in 1989. See Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

[40] See Samuel Efraín Murillo Torres, 'Ubuntu que Acontece: Reflexión Teológica desde la Humanidad Crucificada', in Karen Mayagoitia (ed.), *Desmond Tutu: Una Mirada desde el Pensamiento Social Cristiano* (Ciudad de México: IMDOSOC, 2023), pp. 38–54.

[41] Reggie Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*, 2nd edn. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), p. 1; see also Julio de Santa Ana, 'The Influence of Bonhoeffer in the Theology of Liberation', *The Ecumenical Review* 28.2 (1976): pp. 188–97.

a theology from another culture, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of listening.

These explorations make clear the significance of mutual exchange in enabling transforming encounters. However, how can this occur after such a complicated heritage and struggle for power? How can we learn and move beyond the experience of Aberdeen's seminar? How, through listening, can we expand our view of theological work beyond the impositions from global minorities while considering the life experience, suffering, and exclusion of global majorities? How do we move beyond the dominant imposition of frames from the world's capitalistic cultures to listen to the experience of otherness within majority cultures?

Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures, in engagement with German thought and with the heritage of listening in Harlem, emphasise that Christ, as dogma, cannot be studied or understood with any systematic program or method.[42] Still, his theological move is to be able to ask theologically and within experience, who is Christ in each place and time? Bonhoeffer frames that Christ is for me, for us and for all, as he is existentially at the same time the centre of the whole of creation, the whole of history, and the whole of our own existence while being continuously revealed and tangible to us as word, sacrament and community.[43]

Within this experience of Christ being for all, we are confronted by the 'who?' question in an existential way: Who is Christ? Who am I?[44] From there, the dynamics of formation insist that the theologian must first learn to love before even considering thinking: 'Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them.'[45]

Bonhoeffer's account is challenging in an era where hyper-communication has led societies to ways of life that are assumed to be infinitely connected in a nihilistic excess of positivity.[46] Human beings experience anxiety when there is discontinuity of communication, leading to nihilistic elements in the life of the individual who lacks belonging and community: 'Those who think their time is too precious to spend listening will never really

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[42] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology (Student Notes)', in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 12, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 301.
[43] Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', pp. 315–23, 324–27.
[44] 'There are only two possibilities when a human being confronts Jesus: the human being must either die or kill Jesus. Thus the question, Who are you? remains ambiguous. It can also be the question of those who realise, as soon as they ask the question, that they themselves are meant by it, and instead of hearing the answer, hear the question in return: Who then are you? Only then is it the question of those judged by Jesus. The 'who question' can only be asked of Jesus by those who know that it is being asked of them. But then it is not the human beings who are finished with Jesus, but rather Jesus who is finished with them.' Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', p. 307.
[45] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Life Together', in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, Geffrey B. Kelly, Gerhard Ludwig Müller, and Albrecht Schönherr (eds.), trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 98.
[46] See Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford Briefs, 2015).

have time for God and others, but only for themselves and for their own words and plans.'[47] This is the predominant experience of relatedness today:

> There is also a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. This impatient, inattentive listening really despises the other Christian and finally is only waiting to get a chance to speak and thus to get rid of the other. This sort of listening is no fulfilment of our task. And it is certain that here, too, in our attitude toward other Christians we simply see reflected our own relationship to God. It should be no surprise that we are no longer able to perform the greatest service of listening that God has entrusted to us—hearing the confession of another Christian—if we refuse to lend our ear to another person on lesser subjects.[48]

As Byung-Chul Han considers the systemic challenges of being able to listen and encounter the other, he departs from Michel Foucault's frames of systems of oppression, arguing that in our time, otherness is not only oppressed and excluded. For Han, otherness has totally disappeared from existence.[49] This disappearance is implemented systematically by governance, security, foreign policy, and even the human rights agenda. This results in an incapacity to engage with otherness as brothers and sisters involved in serious theological reflection. In recent years, global ecumenical and interfaith bodies have carried out theological consultations and made public policy proposals to respond to increasing xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism, and gender-based violence, having intercultural listening as key in method, and practice.[50] In other settings, increasingly narrow views relate with the difficulties communities have in listening, in step with trends toward necropolitics (the politics of death) and systemic cultures of shock.[51]

Considering this violent reality experienced by global majorities, how can we proceed thoughtfully as Christians in the present? The call to abide in Christ from John 15 is what

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[47] Bonhoeffer, 'Life Together', p. 98.
[48] Bonhoeffer, 'Life Together', p. 99.
[49] See Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).
[50] See the following messages from consultations: 'Xenophobia, Racism and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration' (World Council of Churches, 2018), https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-from-the-conference-xenophobia-racism-and-populist-nationalism-in-the-context-of-global-migration; 'Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together' (Global Christian Forum, Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2018); 'A Statement of the Second Consultation on Migration of the World Methodist Council - World Methodist Council' (World Methodist Council, 2023), https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/2023/09/18/a-statement-of-the-second-consultation-on-migration-of-the-world-methodist-council/. See also ongoing intersectional research by Kawtar Najib, *Spatialized Islamophobia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Nicolás Panotto and Luis Martínez Andrade (eds.), *Decolonizing Liberation Theologies: Past, Present, and Future* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31131-4.
[51] See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478007227.

Bonhoeffer interprets as the irruption of Christ's being as community (*Gemeinde*).[52] This irruption unfolds as the disaster that occurs when human beings encounter one another.[53] Encounter can only be a disaster because of the deep transformation and change that it provokes in individuals and communities, changing how we think, live, and engage and prompting learning new and different ways of life, communication, and language. It is from this profound experience of encounter that service (*diakonia*) unfolds as the centre of theological endeavour, according to Bonhoeffer: 'Wherever the service of listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is being faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest ministry can also be offered, the service of the Word of God.'[54]

The movement towards life from death, towards theology from the superficial academy, therefore, involves in its very centre the individual's vocation as a response to the encounter with Christ's form (*Gestalt*), a silence in the presence of the Total Other.[55] The formation (*Gestaltung*) of the theologian involves an ongoing tension of simplicity and wisdom.[56] This love, as departure, centre, and limit, allows the enlargement of the heart,[57] resulting in the ability to serve one another in humility, the service of the Word of God put into practice by the theologian. This is the role of a physician in healing the world of the despair of our time. The paradox of Christian formation that only takes place in Christ involves a reality beyond the control of our faculties: 'Perceiving the divine command requires … obedient listening, deciding, and acting in the given moment, an existential act of freedom that cannot be anticipated by any casuistry or teaching of principles.'[58]

This is why theology cannot be a voice in the first person. It is always the Advent of voices beyond our ways or methods. Theology means listening to voices outside every place where it is practiced, without being bound by preconceived expectations. It means abiding within the community given in Christ. This is an existential tension, internal and external, in the ongoing formation of the theologian.

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[52] On Bonhoeffer's claim that church is Christ existing as community (*Gemeinde*), see Clifford J. Green, 'Editor's Introduction to the English Edition', in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Clifford J. Green (ed.), vol. 1, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 14–15.

[53] Byung Chul-Han argues that an encounter is only possible when one recognises the disaster that has just happened as a total irruption of the individual. Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

[54] Bonhoeffer, 'Life Together', p. 103.

[55] Bonhoeffer's centre in his *Ethics* is the relevance of being formed (*Gestaltung*) to the form (*Gestalt*) of Christ. See Samuel Efraín Murillo Torres, '"Going Ahead" as Real Human Beings in the *Gemeinde*: Bonhoeffer's Christological Form and Formation in Suffering and Dying', in Matthias Grebe, Nadine Hamilton, and Christian Schlenker (eds.), *Bonhoeffer and Christology: Revisiting Chalcedon* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), pp. 210–11.

[56] Ilse Tödt et al., 'Editor's Afterword to the German Edition', in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Ilse Tödt et al. (eds.), trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 432–433.

[57] Archimandrite Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart: 'Be Ye Also Enlarged' (2 Corinthians 6:13) in the Theology of St Silouan the Athonite and Elder Sophrony of Essex* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2013).

[58] Ilse Tödt et al., 'Editor's Afterword to the German Edition', p. 426.

Given the barriers to listening and the example of seminar we have described in this paper, Bonhoeffer is right to point us toward listening to voices beyond our places and ways. Listening to the voices of others, especially the voices of the vulnerable from beyond our borders, points to a way out of closure and solipsism during the formation of students of theology. This opening finds its place in Christ irrupting in our communities as we participate in the disaster of encountering one another.