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EDITORIAL

Decolonizing Religion: Engaging Indigenous Knowledge and Transformative Theological Praxis Amidst Global Instability

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Abstract

The perceived binary between “world religions” and indigenous traditions is a colonial construct. The editorial asserts that dismantling this oppositional framework is essential for decolonizing religion and enabling constructive conversations with local and indigenous episteme and practices. The five articles in this edition demonstrate how engaging with local practices and indigenous knowledge creates space for resilience, relationality, and ecological stewardship. Such a decolonial approach offers a crucial framework for responding to contemporary global problems, including the climate crisis, economic precarity, and systemic injustices. Ultimately, this editorial calls for more holistic religious praxes and alternative socio-ethical imaginaries.

Keywords: local practices, Indigenous knowledge, transformative praxis, decoloniality, pluriversal epistemologies

Religious traditions, both globally recognized and locally rooted, fundamentally aspire to cultivate transformative social and ethical changes. A key pathway toward realizing this potential lies in the meaningful conversation of Indigenous and local knowledge systems with major religious frameworks. Such inter-epistemic dialogues not only enable a deeper contextualization of ethical imperatives within diverse communities but also equip religious traditions to offer resilient and adaptive responses to urgent challenges, including the climate crisis, global pandemics, economic precarity, democratic backsliding, and escalating humanitarian emergencies marked by genocide and mass atrocities.¹ Indigenous spiritualities typically operate as living ethical and communal systems that resist colonial and neoliberal paradigms.² As a form of pluriversal epistemologies—the recognition that knowledge is not universal but exists in multiple, coexisting systems rooted in diverse cultural and social contexts—they constitute vibrant repositories that invigorate our collective agency and solidarity in the face of planetary uncertainty.

It is important to recognize that the historical development of the category of “(World) Religions” is directly entangled with colonial power structures. The binary between “universal” world religions and “particular” indigenous traditions originated as part of colonial projects to categorize, manage, and often subordinate local forms of religiosity.³ This oppositional framework persists in both scholarly discourse and state policy, thereby inhibiting constructive conversations with local and indigenous epistemes and practices. Accordingly, genuine decolonial praxis necessitates dismantling these inherited binaries through participatory engagement with pluriversal epistemologies.⁴ Such processes must avoid uncritical romanticization of local cultures or

¹ Raj Kumar Dhungana and Indra Mani Rai Yamphu, “Indigenous Ways of Knowing in Nepal: Exploring Indigenous Research Procedures in Shamanism,” *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* 5, no. 1 (2015): 38–55, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/jisd/article/view/58470>; Ranjan Datta and Teena Starlight, “Building a Meaningful Bridge Between Indigenous and Western Worldviews: Through Decolonial Conversation,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (2024): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241235564>; Samsul Maarif, “Ammatoan Indigenous Religion and Forest Conservation,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 19, no. 2 (2015): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685357-01902005>; Samsul Maarif, “Re-Establishing Human-Nature Relations: Responses of Indigenous People of Indonesia to Covid-19,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): 447–72, <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-bja10023>; Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça and Hans Asenbaum, “Decolonizing deliberative democracy,” *European Journal of Social Theory* (2025): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310241297906>; Aneezah Pervez, “Witnessing silence: the Palestinian genocide, institutional complicity, and the politics of knowledge,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (2025): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2513637>; Roberta Rice, “How to Decolonize Democracy: Indigenous Governance Innovation in Bolivia and Nunavut, Canada,” *Bolivian Studies Journal* 22 (2016): 220–42, <https://doi.org/10.5195/bsj.2016.169>.

² Maria Bargh, *Resistance: An Indigenous Response to Neoliberalism* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2007); Rosangel Lebron, “Different Lenses, Different Lifeways: Embracing Indigenous Worldviews for Sustainability Transformations,” *Desde el Sur* 17, no. 1 (2025): 8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.21142/des-1701-2025-0008>.

³ David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Studies in Religion and Culture) (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ Kimberly Hutchings, “Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2019): 115–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679419000169>; Walter D. Mignolo, “DELINKING: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>; Walter Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” *Theory Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2010): 159–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>.

essentialist notions of authenticity. Rather, they must view local wisdom as a source of reflective and inquisitive space, which can lead to the critical interrogation of dominant narratives and paradigms and the construction of alternative socio-ethical imaginaries.⁵ By unsettling these colonial legacies, religious and academic communities can contribute to more equitable and sustainable futures.⁶

This edition of our journal provides compelling case studies that exemplify the rethinking of hegemonic socio-religious paradigms by substantially engaging with locally situated and indigenous knowledge. The five insightful pieces here examine the experiences of minority religious communities and vulnerable groups in Indonesia: the Badui, Abangan, Confucian, Balinese Protestant, and domestic worker communities. They offer concrete models for resisting marginalization and building resilience. Kiki Hakiki's article argues that, beyond their aesthetic and religious functions, the Badui community's traditional rice barn (*leuit*) plays a vital role in ensuring their food sovereignty, making them less vulnerable to climate change and economic instability. *Leuit* is also a powerful symbol of the Badui's perennial connection with their ancestral knowledge and natural environment. A testament to sustainable living deeply rooted in cosmological harmony, *leuit* demonstrates how sacred spaces can function simultaneously as ecological sanctuaries and loci of resistance to capitalistic food production systems.

Meanwhile, Yohanes Christandi's contribution sheds light on the remarkable resilience of Confucian identity in Indonesia. Despite stringent government control over the press and media during the New Order era, publications such as *Gentrika* and *Genta Rohani* persistently engaged in the construction and assertion of Confucian religious identity, i.e., Agama Konghucu. Highlighting how the Confucian community engages in the state's religious harmony project as a tactical adaptation to externally assert its religious status, this article demonstrates the enduring power of community resilience and cultural expression, even under political constraints. This semi-concealed discursive resistance parallels a form of cultural negotiation and subversion of dominant discourses to sustain identity and agency amid structural violence and repression (cf. James C. Scott's "hidden transcripts").⁷

The article by Larasati et al. on the Abangan's conception of death expands the ethical framework to consider death as a potential consequence of cultural norm violations, environmental disruptions, and adverse encounters with unseen entities. By intimately intertwining the human, nature, and spirit worlds, thereby resisting Cartesian divides, it fosters a more holistic ethical perspective. Likewise, Ferdi Toding Bunga and Dwi Maria Handayani's article extends the application of scriptural ethics surrounding slavery to contemporary labor rights. It illustrates how principles such as liberation, respect for human dignity, and the protection of vulnerable groups, deeply embedded in

⁵ Rangga Kala Mahaswa and Ainu Syaja, "Questioning Local Wisdom in Indonesian Indigenous Research," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 112 (2025): 170–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2025.07.001>.

⁶ Arturo Escobar emphasizes that embracing pluriversal ways of knowing is vital to addressing contemporary planetary crises and to cultivating more equitable possibilities for the future. Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁷ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Torah Law, can serve as a reflective basis for advocating human dignity and labor reform among domestic workers in Indonesia. Both studies demonstrate how religious and local knowledge can serve as active resources for social justice and ethical reimagination.

Finally, Amos Sukamto's study on the revitalization of the Protestant Christian Church in Bali (GKPB) highlights the critical need for context-sensitive leadership to decolonize religion. The article methodically enumerates how a Balinese leader, I Wayan Mastra, employed decolonial hermeneutics by delinking the church from colonial theology and indigenizing gospel teachings to foreground Balinese culture. Mastra's Transformative Contextual Theology also ensures that the GKPB is systemically involved in alleviating the economic precarities of local communities. The model presented in this study asserts that transformative leadership necessitates an in-depth understanding of the socio-political realities and cultural particularities of local communities.

The decolonized and transformative religious praxis discussed in this edition finds powerful global resonance in the teachings and legacy of inspiring religious leaders, particularly the recent papacy of Pope Francis. He consistently championed the creation of authentic, inclusive communities rooted in solidarity and care, urging institutions to become welcoming spaces for all, particularly the young and marginalized. His landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'* emphatically called for urgent climate action, linking environmental degradation directly to human activity and denouncing the "modern myth of unlimited material progress."⁸ Moreover, his critique of neoliberal capitalism, alongside his embrace of indigenous traditions and transformative theology, aligns closely with the themes explored in this edition.⁹

In line with decolonial scholars who emphasize that Indigenous knowledge systems are not only valuable repositories of heritage but also living, relational, and emancipatory practices that actively shape communities and societies,¹⁰ this journal edition showcases how engagement with Indigenous knowledge and local practices can create spaces for transformative praxis. This praxis centers on relationality, collective well-being, and ecological coexistence. This edition aims to contribute to the vision of multitudes of holistic religious praxes, where religious knowledge and local wisdom intersect and entwine to foster sustainable resilience, address systemic injustices, and cultivate an interconnected and compassionate society.

⁸ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home* (Vatican Press, 2015), sec 78, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁹ For examples, see Francis, "Video Message of the Holy Father to the Participants in the World Day of Prayer, Reflection and Action Against Human Trafficking," video, 9:00, February 8, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210208_videomessaggio-contro-trattapersona.html; Devin Watkins, "Pope: Indigenous peoples have right to preserve cultural identity," *Vatican News*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-02/pope-francis-message-ifad-indigenous-peoples-forum.html>; Wes Granberg-Michaelson, "What Pope Francis Wanted to Change," *Reformed Journal*, April 28, 2025, <https://reformedjournal.com/2025/04/28/what-pope-francis-wanted-to-change/>.

¹⁰ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London & New York: Zed Books, 1999); Naomi Terry et al., "Inviting a decolonial praxis for future imaginaries of nature: Introducing the Entangled Time Tree," *Environmental Science & Policy* 151 (2024): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2023.103615>.

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