

Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi. *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality*. Fortress Press, 2024. 237 pages. \$29.00.

From the uniquely fertile vantage point of her own social location and her positionality at the inter-traditional intersections of the church and academy, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, offers in this book a broad yet deeply thoughtful and wholly accessible examination of the phenomenon of religious leadership within North American Christianity today. Building upon the ongoing work of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, Lizardy-Hajbi analyzes the specific assumptions, processes, and notions of authority baked into the structures of leadership often at work within congregations, parachurch organizations, denominational bodies, and seminaries and divinity schools. In this book, Lizardy-Hajbi seeks to challenge the structural integrity of the colonial enterprise of North American religious leadership by pulling on various “threads” of coloniality, an epistemological and ontological reality which the author posits has become so embedded within American Christian thought and practice that it (along with a number of other marginalizing ideologies, like white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism) that it threatens to “strangle” communities of faith and their leaders (2).

In her introduction and first chapter, Lizardy-Hajbi begins the project by laying out the “garment” of contemporary leadership constructs, fleshing out the biblical and historical origins of prevalent models and distinguishing her decolonial approach from that of theorists that utilize the primary lenses of antiracism and diversity and inclusion. The author also offers a brief but helpful literature review in the area of decolonial frameworks of leadership. Emphasizing values such as pluriversality, hybridity, communality, and subversion, the author nods to the book’s goal, which is to encourage the reader to consider the possibilities of a “subversive, subjugated reenvisioning toward *leaderships*,” a purposefully “improper” term intended to capture the expansive potential for co-existent, highly contextual, non-archetypal models of leadership within the increasingly diverse landscape of North American Christianity, both inside and outside of institutional religion (47).

Chapter 2 takes up the first of these pulled-upon threads, which is *individualism*—specifically the notion that the autonomous “fixed self” is the true center of economic, religious, political, and rational reality, and that tapping into one’s so-called “authentic self” is at the heart of the kind of leadership that effects the most institutional good. The author instead urges toward an understanding of the self as *relational person* and offers models of collaborative leadership that operate counter to singular-authority modes.

In chapter 3, the author pulls on the thread of *roles*, attempting to disrupt not only the modern/colonial ideal of the “white, self-sufficient male” (borrowing the term from Willie James Jennings) as the quintessential model for leadership underlying many of the processes and standards of formation used by religious leadership, but also to interrogate various archetypes in which the exertion of *power over* people is the primary mode of operation (77).

Power itself is the pulled thread of chapter 4. The author draws on the work of Weber and Foucault, as well as various decolonial scholars to sketch out modern/colonial frameworks of power. She examines the notions of management and leadership, fleshing out the differences between the two, and problematizes the popular religious leadership trope of *servant leadership*. Lizardy-Hajbi suggests that religious leaders engage in the disruptive movements of “revealing” power dynamics within organizations and “reweaving” them through tactics such as mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity (124-130).

In chapter 5, Lizardy-Hajbi tugs on the thread of expertise in order to show the ways that the core habitus of *certainty* within modern/colonial frameworks of leadership (that is, the intertwining of knowledge and power) can lead to the exclusion of gifted leaders who do not meet the eurowestern standards of “excellence” demanded of a “learned clergy” (147-151). The author calls instead for institutions to employ a habitus of *curiosity*, placing higher values on more embodied and experiential knowledges and skills.

Finally, in chapter 6, the author takes up the thread of *change*, analyzing two popular models of *transformational leadership*: Ronald A. Heifetz’s adaptive leadership and John P. Kotter’s eight-step process for leading change. She challenges both of these models for their dependence on a singular leader and their underlying assumption that the telos of any institution should be to continue in perpetuity (167). As alternative models, the author highlights the work of adrienne marie brown around emergent strategy and collective leadership as well as that of Tricia Hersey around rest and resistance.

This book serves as an excellent primer in decolonial organizational theory and offers accessible, well-researched arguments to support the author’s deconstructive aims and her nods toward new theoretical possibilities. Few practical suggestions are offered, which the author admits is by design, so as to not tempt any notion of universal application that may reinforce hegemonic thinking (194). Nonetheless, Lizardy-Hajbi’s book easily earns a place on the shelf—alongside the work of those like Willie James Jennings, Keri Day, and Mark B. Jordan—for any theological education administrator, denominational leader, faculty member, or pastor looking for thought partners as they seek to reimagine the leaderships of their organizations.

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