

# Concept Note<sup>1</sup>

## World Christianity Studies and Asymmetrical Dependency (WCSAD)

### Working Group

### Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS)

#### What is the WCSAD Working Group?

The World Christianity Studies and Asymmetrical Dependency (WCSAD) Working Group provides an international and interdisciplinary platform for exploring the relationship between World Christianity Studies (WCs) and Asymmetrical Dependency Research (ADr).

#### What is World Christianity Studies- WCs (in Bonn)?

Over the past several decades, 'World Christianity' discourses have arisen as critiques or complexifications of classical ecumenical, missiological, and religious studies that emphasize (and universalize) 'Western' developments and norms. Today, the study of World Christianity, or what we in Bonn might call *World Christianity Studies*, is an interdisciplinary approach to the academic study of Christianity as a worldwide, intercultural, contextually embodied, and historically shaped tradition. The WCSAD working group thus studies world Christianity via sundry methodological, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives that shed light on the diversity of Christianity(ies) over time, space, localities, and positionalities.

#### What is Asymmetrical Dependency Research- ADr?

Asymmetrical dependency research (ADr) deploys the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency to "replace the traditional binary opposition of 'slavery versus freedom' still prevalent in slavery studies' and other fields of inquiry with a 'much broader concept' that 'aims to encompass all forms that human bondage and coercion have taken over time" ([Winnebeck et al.](#)) This emerging analytical concept seeks to create space for contextualized, comparative, and interdisciplinary studies of asymmetrical dependencies across societies, both past and present.

There are points of overlap between ADr and the dependency theories that arose in the mid-twentieth century and exerted some influence over the development of world Christianity studies, especially those shaped by the liberation theologies of Latin America. Nevertheless, ADr at BCDSS arose out of a critique within the field of slavery studies. While international

---

<sup>1</sup> Written by [David Brandon Smith](#). Last updated on 16. February 2024.

actors and contemporary geopolitical concerns can undoubtedly be included under the umbrella of ADr, the ‘actors’ on which studies of asymmetrical dependency can focus include not only nation-states, regional blocs, and conglomerates within an economic superstructure but also communities and individuals. Moreover, studies of asymmetrical dependency span historical epochs and are not exclusively tied to considerations of phenomena through the lens of contemporary challenges.

According to Winnebeck et al., asymmetrical dependency/ies or asymmetrically dependent social relationships include (at least) some variation of the following characteristics,

1. Asymmetrical dependency occurs within relations between two or more actors. The position of an actor can, in principle, be assumed by all entities, i.e., human beings, animals, elements of nature, material artifacts, gods, and spirits.
2. Asymmetrical dependency is based on the ability of one actor to control the actions of another actor and/or their access to resources.
3. Asymmetrical dependency is usually supported by an institutional context in such a way as to ensure that the dependent actors cannot simply change their situation by either going away (‘exiting’) or by articulating impactful protest (i.e., having ‘voice’ in the sense that self-expression can result in substantive change to one’s experience).

Thus, asymmetrical dependencies are *relational* in nature. The analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency seeks to identify the case-specific interlocutions of such relationships and, thereby, to move beyond uncritical generalizations as to their embodiment in particular contexts at specific times.

Phenomena like the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th to 19th centuries are often defined as ‘strong’ or ‘extreme’ forms of asymmetrical dependency. Asymmetrical dependencies that persist until the present age (i.e., ‘modern slaveries,’ human trafficking, bonded labor, child labor, forced migration, etc.) are often defined as Contemporary Asymmetrical Dependencies (CADs) or as ‘enduring’ asymmetrical dependencies— they are ‘enduring’ when they are grounded in long-standing intersectional experiences of marginality that persist from past to present (though their forms and particulars may have evolved).

Asymmetrical dependencies can also be defined as ‘pervasive’ or ‘weak.’ In this context, ‘weak’ is best understood in terms of the *weak ties* identified by network analysis rather than as the polar opposite of ‘strong’ dependencies. In certain cases, these forms of dependency *might*, in contrast to the third characteristic referenced above, include some form of an ‘exit option.’

### **Why do we Need a Working Group Focused on the Relationship Between WCs and ADr?**

The WCSAD working group’s goal of starting a conversation about the relationship between world Christianity studies and asymmetrical dependency research is grounded in the BCDSS’s commitment to interdisciplinary and intercultural academic engagement. While there are theologians among us, and though our work could be defined as ‘theological research,’ it is not our exclusive aim to engage in the task of constructive theology. Rather, we hope to study

Christianity as it relates to asymmetrical dependencies as historical, legal/normative, anthropological, socio-cultural, and psychological phenomena. The results of our explorations will, we believe, be relevant both to constructive theological discourse within the Christian tradition and to the academic study of religion and religions (*religionswissenschaft*) more broadly.

World Christianity discourses share key research interests with slavery and dependency studies and *vice versa*. Like dependency studies, world Christianity studies is largely defined by its focus on silenced narratives and critique of rigid disciplinary and methodological categories. The world Christianity studies 'approach' and the asymmetrical dependency 'concept' draw not only on theological and religious studies but also on approaches traditionally employed by social historiography, sociology, social and cultural anthropology, political science, economics, psychology, philosophy, legal studies, linguistics, literary studies, international relations, and area studies.

The work of the BCDSS has opened new avenues of research that resonate with the study of the global Christian tradition, its theologies, and its relationship(s) to social structures and phenomena. Indeed, the history of Christianity, world Christianity discourses, ecumenics, intercultural theological research, slavery studies, and asymmetrical dependency research are inseparable on both the levels of human experience and academic exploration. Consequently, the following assertions generate the multi-directional impulse of the WCSAD working group:

- The history and contemporary experience of Christianity in all its diversity is linked with the construction of, resistance to, and operation within structures of asymmetrical dependency.
- Contextually aware and historically grounded studies of Christianity are lacking if they negate the persistence and pervasiveness of social relationships defined by the BCDSS as asymmetrical dependencies.
- In many contexts, asymmetrical dependency research is impoverished if it lacks an awareness of the role of Christianity(ies) in constructing, resisting, operating, and/or cooperating with structures of asymmetrical dependency.
- The legacies of past expressions of asymmetrical dependency relations (e.g., diverse forms of slavery, serfdom, bondage, and extractive colonialism) have shaped the global Christian tradition in ways that continue to influence its contemporary expressions.
- Relations of asymmetrical dependency endure within and exert an influence over the global Christian communion and how its members experience life in the world (e.g., through unequal experiences of ecological dependencies, religious legitimizations of hegemonic gender constructs, racial categories, oppressive sexual norms, limitations on and weaponizations of religious freedom discourses, etc.)
- Contemporary Asymmetrical Dependencies (CADs) like modern slaveries, human trafficking, extractive economic systems, and more persist as concerns across Christian communions.
- World Christianity studies and the theorization of the discourses it shapes may both affirm and critique the comparative and case-based approaches to ADr currently employed at the BCDSS (e.g., because of its potential fixation on universalistic classification).

## What Does the WCSAD Group do, and Who can Get involved?

*Discuss:* The WCSAD working group meets monthly in a hybrid format (in person and online via Zoom). Some monthly sessions focus on administrative matters related to the group and our activities. However, most are called ‘Table Talks,’ which include brief presentations, interviews, or panel discussions that focus on the work of one or more invited experts. After the talks, the floor is opened for an extended period of informal discussion. ‘Table Talks’ may also reference pre-circulated readings.

*Collaborate:* The WCSAD working group is a collaborative endeavor. Within the University of Bonn, the group includes members at all levels of the BCDSS, students, researchers, and professors from Bonn’s Catholic and Protestant Faculties of Theology, along with representatives of other institutes and cohorts from across the university. We also have the pleasure of collaborating with members and representatives of theological education institutions around the world.

*Share:* The WCSAD working group aims to share the results of its discussions as broadly as possible. Public events, workshops, and seminars will be planned by members of the working group, which will also engage in other projects. Currently, several projects are in development:

- Monthly WCSAD ‘Table Talks’ provide opportunities for BCDSS members and colleagues from around the world to explore the complex relationship between the working group’s foci: world Christianity studies and asymmetrical dependency research.
- A ‘Bonn Delegation,’ including a representative of the BCDSS, will attend the Fourth Annual World Christianity Conference of Princeton Theological Seminary and the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) to be hosted by the University of Ghana in March 2024.
- A “World Christianity and Asymmetrical Dependency” Panel will be proposed for the Fifth Annual World Christianity Conference of Princeton Theological Seminary and the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in March 2025
- A Special Issue of the *Journal of World Christianity on World Christianity and Asymmetrical Dependency*, Co-Edited by Matthew R. Robinson, Julia Winnebeck, and Raimundo Barreto, as Volume 15, Issue 1 (planned for March 2025)