

JOURNAL OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY



VOLUME TWO | ISSUE TEN



Doing **Liberation** **Theology** in **South Africa**

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INTRODUCTION

I cannot enter this conversation without noting that I write as one ordained by the Dutch Reformed Church. While it could hardly be argued that liberation theologies were welcomed formally by the institutional churches – with relationships at the very least strained across the denominational spectrum – the Dutch Reformed Church was particularly vicious in its denunciation and rejection of all theologies of liberation. Its 1986 synod for example, often hailed for its landmark decisions on rejecting apartheid theology, repeatedly indicated its severe rejection of liberation theologies.² While such strong language would no longer be heard, there has to my knowledge never been a fundamental change in position within this denominational body, and the markers of a continuation of this general sentiment is not difficult to discern.³

When writing this I'm also conscious of the fact that I'm not writing to the poor, the majority of those suffering daily due to the injustices of our society. The genre for which this essay is being produced, and the context in which it is being produced, forces an engagement with an academic audience. The words used and the way in which sentences are constructed require an extensive process of being inducted into academic life. So, I



am conscious of the fact that I am seeking to explore the meaning of liberation theology for the future of South Africa in conversation with my fellow academic theologians. As will become clear in the argument below, this is not without its problems, and it is vital that the limitations of such an essay be noted. We could rightly argue that this essay, and many like it, is not in itself liberation theology, but rather a reflection on a theological process happening elsewhere which can more aptly be described by that name. Conscious of the fact that academic theology is also closely related to a process of formation of those who will spend only a small (but hopefully significant) part of their lives in a formal academic setting, words such as these are also aimed at developing a process of reflection which would hopefully direct both those of us who make a career out of academic work, as well as those who join us for a shorter time for studies and research, towards the kind of theology on which it reflects. As Jim Perkinson says in a slightly different vein, we cannot do liberation theology “by remaining in one’s (white) room and ‘thinking thoughts’”.⁴ When then called on to “think thoughts”, the goal should be to think ourselves back into a struggle for justice alongside those who are left powerless and oppressed in our societies.

This last point is to a large extent what drives the reflection below. While I do try to respond to the call of the broader project that this forms part of by framing the topic under discussion in terms of seeking some conceptual clarity (particularly as it relates to its use in South Africa), tracing some threads of its contemporary and historic usage, and, most importantly, suggesting avenues for future exploration that I discern to be of particular relevance, all of this happens as part of an attempt to ask how the academic theology being done here can conceptually join the struggle for justice that remains ongoing in many sectors and communities – and where some in academic appointments or committing to extensive academic studies and research do play significant roles.

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The essay below develops over four parts. In the first I seek to explore the somewhat awkward nature of an essay on liberation theology in South Africa finding its voice alongside essays on black, womanist, and African theology (to name but some examples) in the same project. What is liberation theology when found here? In the second part I briefly outline some threads common to liberative discourses in the present. These are not meant as a systematic analysis of contemporary liberation theology, but rather highlights developments which illustrate some of the complexities being reflected on today. Thirdly, I note some important concepts from liberation theology in the South African past, and lastly, in the longest section of the essay, I outline four themes that I propose liberation theologies (alongside other liberative movements) need to engage on in the coming decades.

WHAT DO WE SPEAK ABOUT WHEN WE SPEAK ABOUT LIBERATION THEOLOGY?

A few notes are required to situate this essay. While I have not read these yet, I write this essay knowing that it will find a place alongside essays on black theology, womanist theology, prophetic theology, feminist theology, African theology, and potentially other liberative trajectories. Essays on biblical hermeneutics in Africa, ecotheology, and potentially a variety of essays on the development of various doctrinal loci in South Africa will most probably touch on liberation theology as well. Throughout the process of writing the question of what exactly it is that I should be writing about has therefore been a key concern. What is “liberation theology”, as a specific field or focus, if placed alongside (as opposed to being used as name for a collection of other liberative theologies) these other conversations? Specifically, what is it in South Africa?

Daniel Migliore, in his influential *Faith Seeking Understanding*, points to the fact that ecumenical theology has only but started to work out the implication of the broad range of theologies named as liberation theologies on the future of theology.⁵ In South African theology there is little doubt that the quest for liberation, particularly as it took form in the struggle against apartheid, have irreversibly shifted the direction of theological reflection. Looking at the topics proposed for this project this very project is perhaps in large part an attempt at seeking to trace the impact of this shift decades after the end of legal apartheid – what happened to contextual theologies (another word at times used to refer to the broad range of theologies named as liberation theologies)⁶ in the years since the end of legalised apartheid?

Introducing questions of liberation theologies in South Africa, as part of a broader introduction of theologies in South Africa, require some careful demarcation. On the one hand the multifaceted nature of liberation

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theology, and its impact on the entire theological project needs to be recognised. A broad reflection on doing theology in context in South Africa could be argued to be a liberative project in general. If one part of such an introduction requires thinking through liberation theology more specifically, then the question inevitably needs to be asked which lens it introduces other than the particular theologies focusing on questions of race, gender, African epistemology and culture, or environmental destruction. What is the focus of liberation theology when reflected upon in parallel to a variety of liberation theologies? One aspect of what I attempt in this essay is then not to present liberation theology as an umbrella for a variety of streams introduced elsewhere. I fully recognise that questions of liberation cannot be reduced to a essay on liberation theology labelled in that way but is expected to inevitably find expression in the variety of essays already mentioned. But still, I approach this essay searching for that which can be named liberation theology as one among many streams of liberative theological reflection existing within the diverse theological dialogue in South Africa.

The problem is not just imagined. An introduction on liberation theology today which fails to recognise how it takes form as black, feminist, womanist, queer, African, Asian, indigenous, or ecological theologies (if not all of these, then at least some, and most likely including areas of focus not listed here) would be rightfully criticised. To name but a few examples:

- Joseph Ogbonnaya’s introduction to African liberative theologies explicitly states that “Africans have not formulated a theology that can be called liberation theology in the Latin American sense”⁷, but labels the broad movement of African theology from the second half of the 20th century onward as fundamentally liberative. “In other words, inculturation,

liberation, black/reconstruction, reconciliation, and theologies of women are also African liberative theologies. One cannot talk of African liberation theology while excluding any of them”.⁸

- Theo Witvliet’s *A Place in the Sun* in the 1980s already introduced liberation theology through a focus on black, African, Caribbean and Rastafarian, Latin American, and Asian theology.⁹
- Mario Aguilar in a recent brief overview on the history of liberation theology starts with Vatican II, Medellín, Gutiérrez, and then identifies a broadening of reflections by women, Hispanic, black and various indigenous groups.¹⁰
- Gerald West, to whom I return shortly, when describing liberation hermeneutics in South Africa, similarly identifies “five or six main strands”.¹¹
- Lilian Barger’s recent intellectual history of liberation theology in the Americas similarly notes that this particular intellectual history must wade through the influence of black and feminist theologies, as well as the Latin American expressions more often found under this name.¹²

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Perhaps one preliminary observation possible in an essay on liberation theology situated within a broader work on South African theology which comes with the table of contents that this particular project promises, is that liberation theology is at the heart of contemporary academic theology in South Africa. While many contemporary publications on liberation theology like a refrain asks (even when then responding to the question in the affirmative) whether there is a future for liberation theology, the collection of essays of which this essay forms part would suggest that South African theology cannot have a future which is not indebted to liberation theology, nor one in which liberation theology, in the many forms contained in this project, and we should assume new ones still to come, plays a vital, probably primary, role.¹³

Tinyiko Maluleke's critique of a public theology which attempts to position itself as an umbrella theology for all theology, as universal¹⁴, should be recalled for liberation theology, when presented as a single overarching vision, as well. The first challenge of this essay is therefore to consider the request for one more essay on liberation theology, given the abundance of introductions on the topic, and ask to its particularity. What do we speak of when we speak about liberation theology here?

In a brief introduction to liberation theology, Miguel De la Torre opens his reflection with an emphasis on resistance.¹⁵ Liberation theologies find their voice in conversation with movements of resistance to forces of oppression. My choice to emphasise a focus on theologies of resistance here does not imply that theologies of reconstruction or public theologies cannot have a liberative agenda or goal. The deep conviction in God's work of liberating all people from all forms of oppression could, and should, rightfully lead us to working for the reformation of unjust systems. However, as I'll outline below, when reflecting on liberation theology explicitly, particularly when that is a more focused form of what can be described as a broader social and theological vision of a transformed society and world, the key is not primarily the longing for a liberated world, but rather an epistemological and social commitment to working in solidarity with those on the underside of structures of oppression – whether these are named as empire, modernity, coloniality, heteronormativity, or patriarchy.

Yet such an emphasis on resistance again leads to a focus on liberation theology as an overarching category for numerous movements, which does not do justice to the multiple voices present in this project. But perhaps a more particular focus is identifiable in our context.

Ogbonnaya's introduction to African liberative theologies, again, illustrates the challenge. He too names a "liberation theology" as one particular stream within the river of African liberative theologies – with liberative theologies being the overarching framework and liberation theology one particular focus. For him, this is the stream which has as primary focus socioeconomic circumstances and questions of poverty in relation to global financial systems, making this material crisis the foundation for a quest for human dignity.¹⁶

West's overview of liberation hermeneutics in South Africa intuits the problem of this introduction: where does the particular stream of theology that typically goes by the label "liberation theology" fit into the broader family of theologies under the umbrella of "liberation theology", and what form does this take in South Africa? West also identifies black, African, and African womanist theologies as part of this family, while in 2004 also emphasising HIV-positive theology. However, of particular relevance for this argument is what he names as

“contextual theology”.¹⁷ Here the work of Albert Nolan is of primary importance¹⁸, and here too West notes the relationship with Latin American liberation theology (while noting that the two have distinct trajectories).

What I propose below is then not a thorough political theology or theory of economic justice. However, I seek to situate this essay among other essays through outlining potential ways in which we can think through our political organisation and economic structures theologically and in dialogue with our local theological history of doing exactly this.¹⁹

Nonetheless, my indebtedness to black theology of liberation will be clear in the argument below. The particular history of the struggle for liberation as it emerged in confrontation with the racist regime under apartheid implies that any theology of liberation within the South African context will have to give priority to this particular expression. This is also the trajectory that has most distinctly formed my own development. Yet the question of race in general and whiteness in particular that is the focus of a black theology of liberation is, even while never far from this argument, left to another to attend to more explicitly in this project.

L I B E R A T I O N T H E O L O G Y T O D A Y

My intention here is not to attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of liberation theologies today. Rather, what I briefly touch on is a range of concepts that highlights how liberation theologies are attempting, or need to attempt, to name and respond to ongoing structures of oppression after the movements of formation of post-colonial nation-states in the middle 20th century, questions which speak directly to the current South African context after the transition from legalised apartheid.

After the end of history?

Democratic South Africa has a particular connection to arguments on the end of history. Fukuyama’s argument in 1989 was that the final form of society had arrived in Western liberalism accompanied by a market economy.²⁰ The connection between the end of the USSR, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the unbanning of liberation movements with the aim to move towards democratic rule has often been commented upon. Of particular significance since the period of negotiations to the present has been debates around the choices on economic policy and its practical impact on a more just and equitable future.

Despite Fukuyama’s question mark in the title of the 1989 paper, the question has been translated into a

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statement of truth in numerous instances. Yet the questioning did not end in 1989 and remains of particular significance for those on the underside of global structures of power and resource distribution – the same groups that liberation theologies take as its primary interlocutors. In as much as the “end of history” is not the “end of suffering”, Christian visions cannot but continue to remind that this end is not God’s end, that God yet has history after the end of history.

On the one hand, liberation theologies of the past decades had to operate under the repeated claim that no alternative structure to society is possible, including that Christian visions on the structuring of society cannot in any meaningful way contribute to an alternative.²¹ On the other hand, more recent developments, particularly since the global economic recession of 2008, has repeatedly raised the question on whether this end of history indeed has the final word. As David Harvey reminds, capitalism is indeed in crisis, but also, those alternative visions which Fukuyama could thoroughly dismiss in 1989 continue to contribute to possible answers to understanding the crisis that we are in.²² It is then perhaps no surprise that the repetitive question on the relevance of liberation theologies has in recent years reversed and a renewed interest can be observed.

However, what will remain of primary importance for liberation theologies is the question of who evaluates the current structure of society and on what grounds? As West reminds, more important than the label “liberation” is the particular methodological commitment to work alongside oppressed communities.²³ And from there, recent history both globally, but in a particular way in South Africa, call for a refusal to easily accept that this is how it will be.

Empire

The notion “empire” has found its way into liberation theologies since its early days²⁴, and in ecumenical theology has been prominent in the Accra confession and ensuing debates.

Jeorg Rieger describes empire as:

Empire, in sum, has to do with massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone. This is one of the basic marks of empire throughout history. Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically – these factors are commonly recognized – but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously.²⁵

Of interest here is the way empire is used to describe structures of power which cannot easily be reduced to concrete political or economic actors and how its power is noted not only in the “hard” effects of geographic occupation and economic exploitation, but in the way in which minds are controlled.

The language of empire was however used to refer to the global dominance of the United States of America in particular as the world entered the 21st century. Albert Nolan states explicitly that power is still about the power of the gun, even while the effect is seen in the vast inequalities in the world:

And while in a sense money rules the world, as it has done for thousands of years, the really oppressive power in the human world is the gun. You cannot dominate the world with your money if you do not have the weapons to protect your wealth

...

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Those who analyze and study the structures of power in the world today are in no doubt about the dominance of the mighty American Empire with its weapons of mass destruction, its armies spread out around the globe.²⁶

While liberation theology at its inception was often caught up in debates on two alternative visions for the future of the global world, between the “West” and the “East”, it entered the 21st century after the so-called “end of history” where there was a sense that, for good or ill, a single dominating power remained and was encroaching on all – that the world was living under a new “empire”.

Coloniality

More recently, and with far more significance in South African debates, questions on decoloniality have captured the imaginations of those attempting to describe the reality of the present. Not dissimilar to Rieger’s description of empire above, the distinction between colonialism and coloniality is often found in the shift from direct political control of a particular geographic area into the deeper disruption of being which permeates matters of epistemology, aesthetics, and the very notion of the human: “coloniality and decoloniality refer to the logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power created by the massive processes of colonization and decolonization”.²⁷

Even while exploding into public awareness and receiving excessive academic attention only in recent years²⁸, such a deeper colonial logic which is not to be reduced to geographic occupation nor resolved through political transition has been of concern since the mid-20th century, with the work of Fanon receiving sustained attention in the present, and the importance of Biko to contemporary South African debates a reminder of this.

Of particular importance is the way in which the ongoing impact of a world shaped under colonialism is impacting the present and future, despite the formation of independent nation-states across the African continent. Nelson Maldonado-Torres describe this reality by stating that “Modernity/coloniality seeks to conceal its war-like character by not even allowing its status to be named or questioned by those who are on the receiving end of its constant violence”.²⁹ These pervasive structures of oppression – a “war-like character” – which continue to exist without an official declaration of war or formal conquest and foreign rule, is what is of increasing concern in the present.

The intersection between mission and colonialism has received sustained critique over the past decades, but as Rieger pointed out almost two decades ago, theologians have been rather more reluctant to consider the way in which contemporary theology was intertwined with the colonial project.³⁰ This reluctance has however received sustained challenge from liberation theologies over the past decades, and recent shifts in the intellectual climate in South Africa has forced a more sustained consideration of this intersection. As Jennings argues in his influential study *The Christian Imagination*, theology and theological reflection was consistently moving alongside those in power to provide theological and intellectual justification for the process of European colonialism, in the process distorting theology itself.³¹ Christian theology as it developed in tandem with a colonial reimagination then remains a fundamental part of the “logic, metaphysics, ontology”³² accompanying colonisation and remaining alive in the wake of decolonisation. When Vellem, for example, argues, that the “West” needs to be “unthought”³³ then part of what needs to be unthought is a theological imagination which continues to reproduce a colonial (and racist) logic after the end of formal colonial (or apartheid) administrations.

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Key to this brief sketch of the present, is then the multifaceted ways in which liberation theologies are confronted with a world where power is no longer (if ever it was) neatly tied up with geographic administrations or visible structures of domination, but with a world where the forces that keep people in bondage and oppression act across the boundaries of geographic administration and economic exploitation and take root in the innermost realms of the construction of personhood and identity.

LIBERATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN THEOLOGY

Rather than attempt a historic overview of South African theologies of liberation, I here trace a particular thread of ideas which further sets the scene for a series of proposals on the kinds of explorations that may be of significance in the coming years.

Opposing apartheid

Perhaps the greatest strength of historic South African liberation theologies also became one of its greatest weaknesses. Liberation theologies emerge in tandem with the struggle against apartheid. Its theological reflection ties in with a growing resistance movement against the apartheid state and works in parallel with a growing resistance against apartheid globally. With many of the key voices in South African liberation theology actively involved in struggle movements, a theology developed which had a clear goal and deep roots in the movements in communities. This strength of being closely tied up with a concrete movement of liberation closely intertwines with the struggle with discerning its function when the liberation movements become drawn into the structures of political and economic dominance.

The struggle against apartheid was never a monolithic movement. Radically diverse ideological visions presented drastically different critiques.³⁴ Theological voices agreeing on their opposition to apartheid simultaneously differed fundamentally on many other aspects – not least of these being the reception of liberation theologies and the evaluation of particular strategies of resistance (such as sanctions and the use of violence in resisting oppression). When asking about the past and future of liberation theology in South Africa (and beyond), the reminder that not every Christian opposition to apartheid provides an example of a liberative theology is vital.

However, the opposition to apartheid did provide a particular rallying point and a focus for theological

reflection which impact not only on contemporary South African theology but in fact reverberated across the world. Apartheid was the problem.³⁵ The apartheid government was denounced as an illegitimate government. One vital element of liberation theologies under apartheid is that it responds theologically to an unjust regime which itself seeks to provide explicit theological and Christian support for its policies and acts.³⁶ This gave particular meaning to thick theological language developed as alternative to apartheid theologies – what *Kairos* would describe as “state theology”.

We the people ...

A brief Gramscian detour is in order here. While the idea of organic intellectuals has some traction in South African liberation theology, it is important to recall that in Gramsci’s treatment of this notion, the organic intellectual was not by default an intellectual in relationship with those oppressed, but that every class produces its organic intellectuals.³⁷ An organic intellectual, or in our case organic theologian, can indeed be thinking from and in relation to the middle class or ruling elite. As Rieger, quoting Driver, reminds in relation to context – merely emphasising context could imply “doing theology in a warm bathtub”³⁸, which could consider context, but would imply a context of middle-class self-sufficiency and comfort. Similarly, Nico Botha³⁹ argues for a distinction between contextuality and contextual theology – where the former implies a more general recognition of the contextual nature of theology and the latter a more conscious engagement with context. The context of liberation theology was to be that of “the people” – with the people here not dissimilar to Gutierrez’ nonpersons.⁴⁰

South African liberation theologies persistently worked from the premise that the context of the majority of people is that of suffering and oppression. When Albert Nolan wrote *God in South Africa*, he seeks to illustrate what emerges from the grassroots of where people are mobilising resistance – people’s power.⁴¹ Similarly, the claim of the *Kairos* document is that it is a people’s document.⁴² West captures the relationship between liberation theology and the people when stating that “... whilst there is a role for socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians in facilitating a more structured and systematic prophetic theology from ‘people’s theology’, there can be no prophetic theology without people’s theology”.⁴³ The extent to which academic theologies placing themselves within a liberation theology trajectory (and this project is not exempt from this critique) was able to truly reflect on the people’s theology emerging from a context of suffering and oppression remains a matter of debate.⁴⁴

The logic of apartheid made the people into an easily identifiable group – they were racialised as black by a white supremacist legal framework enforced by the structures of power of the state. Today a multiplicity of understandings of who “the people” would be, can be found, with key arguments around questions of gender and, for the purpose of this argument, an ongoing debate on the understanding of class in South Africa.⁴⁵ Yet that liberation theology should be a theology closely intertwined with a people’s theology, however understood, remains a vital thread.

Solidarity

One way in which the oppositional commitments of a theology reflecting from “the people” was expressed is in the notion *solidarity*. Takatso Mofokeng’s Christology provided one of the most sustained and explicitly theological reflections on what it would imply to be in solidarity with the people – with the people crucified.⁴⁶

At the heart of the Christian faith is the confession that God becomes human in Jesus Christ. This simple statement has produced libraries of reflection over centuries, but of importance here is that it also opens the door towards a liberatory trajectory underpinning the Christian faith. A Christian witness cannot escape the reminders from the earliest sources that in the incarnation God is not revealed as one of the rich and powerful of the world, but as a servant or slave (Philippians 2:7). For Mofokeng, the starting point of a black Christology is at the birth in the manger. The context of black South Africans draws them to the story of Jesus born in poverty, and Mofokeng follows black Christians in starting his Christology here.⁴⁷ Jesus “born poor” is not accidental, but of utmost importance for the meaning of the incarnation. Here God is revealed as in a particular way being in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Jesus’ life is one of solidarity with the poor and confrontation of the powers of oppression, leading to his final crucifixion⁴⁸, and as Jesus in his life lived in solidarity with the poor, so the Spirit of God is in a particular way working among the poor.

The Christian community that is being drawn into the history of God in the world by the Holy Spirit follows the Son and engages in a history of liberative immersion in the world of those who suffer. (There is a simultaneity in the actual effective working of the Son in his immersion in the world of the poor and the actual effective working of the Spirit of God among the poor).⁴⁹

The title of Mofokeng’s most well-known work, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers*, calls forth this Christologically informed solidarity. However, in a less well-known article a decade later he recognises the confusion that the words caused, and clarifies that he

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... adopt the concept “crucified people” with reference to the oppression of black people in South Africa. For those who are bearing the cross and using it as an instrument of liberation, we shall use the concept “crossbearers” in this article.⁵⁰

Few concepts play such a significant role in Mofokeng’s writings as “solidarity”. On one level Mofokeng uses solidarity to describe a general positive attribute of communal life, and a particular attribute of African communal life that needs retrieval.⁵¹ On the other hand, he uses the notion to describe the work of Christ and the Trinitarian life of God.⁵² His use of the notion of concern here is however Christologically connected to the more specific notion of “crossbearers”. Solidarity is then the act of taking up the cross and wielding it towards liberation for the crucified in our own times. Solidarity as cross-bearing is an act of discipleship and implies a concrete commitment in life.

If God is submerged in the life of the poor and oppressed then God is not to be found everywhere, but related to us through our solidarity with the poor and oppressed.⁵³ The resurrection is tangible where Christ raises a “community of solidarity... outraged by the innocent cry of the crucified”.⁵⁴ Liberation theology has always been tied up with the question of who we are doing theology with. It is not merely about which voices we give preference in our theological discourse, but about *whose interest our theology serves*. The task Mofokeng leaves us with is then to stand consistently with those who are oppressed in our day, and in terms of our theology to work for a theology which would wield the cross towards liberation.

THE FUTURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

I start this concluding section of future questions with two questions that could comprise multiple shelves in a library – questions that are so broad that some would say it encompasses every social concern that liberation theology may potentially want to respond to: that of the state and the economy. I will not propose to more than scratch the surface on these, but I do want to indicate why these more general questions are particular questions within the contemporary South African context. After questions of the state and the economy, I raise two further questions in even more brief fashion – as agenda points for the coming years. My questions speak primarily to the content of liberation theology as outlined thus far. I want to ask what some of the things might be that should be on the agenda of *liberation* theology in the immediate future, why these questions should be on the agenda of liberation *theology*, and how they might potentially be explored in years to come. It is by necessity a broad overview that, if meaningful, would require many voices to expand on in decades to come. On the other hand, in presenting these I suggest that this is what is already being done in numerous places.

The question of the state

Perhaps a central “problem” of liberation theology after the end of apartheid is how to negotiate the shift in the relationship between liberation theology and liberation movements once such movements become “party in government”. Liberation theology emerges in conversation with concrete movements working for political change – with the struggle against apartheid key among these – what then happens when such movement achieves some level of “success”?⁵⁵ While liberation theologies in South Africa, as elsewhere, should not be

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conflated in ways which ignore its diversity, the support for democracy⁵⁶, as part of a rejection of white minority rule under apartheid, had broad support. The *Freedom Charter* marks this commitment when stating as first call “The people shall govern!” and linking this “self-governance” to the right to vote and to the formation of various organs and institutions to make this self-governance concrete.⁵⁷

The vision of a progressive state which ensures a dignified life for all has been at the heart of many discourses of liberation, and that the state is the vehicle through which injustice should be addressed and suffering ended continue to be assumed by much of liberation theology. Whether the state in its current form is lauded for its transformative role, or whether the call is for its transformation (usually envisioned through a shift in elected officials), Julian Brown’s observation on the dominant stories of South African politics too often hold for discourses of liberation theology, broadly understood, in South Africa as well: “they focus on the powerful and locate politics and political activity in the state and its institutions”.⁵⁸

In South African theology this is perhaps best illustrated by the so-called phase of “critical solidarity” of the South African Council of Churches. This has been discussed extensively over the past decades (with a debate stretching back to the earliest days of democracy).⁵⁹ Without reading too much into the phrase which has become a buzzword⁶⁰, nor here asking whether it’s use in later years aligned with the initial intention, the importance of this concept here is the idea that the church can best work for justice when in close relation to the mechanisms of power – specifically the state. When such a close relationship is justified, it will at the best of times be accompanied by the assumption that the task of the church in such a close relationship is to speak ‘truth to power’, in a sense, that the ‘critical’ should be a

key concern. The discomfort is however in the way that the ‘solidarity’ with the state inevitably replaces a solidarity with the crucified, with those suffering and oppressed. For some, the *Kairos* critique of state theology becomes applicable to the kind of solidarity expressed by the church to the state after 1994.⁶¹

What these introductory comments illustrate is perhaps primarily the importance of the question of the state for the future of liberation theology in South Africa. How do those living within the borders of what goes by the name of South Africa relate to the state of South Africa? Of greater importance for this essay: how does the poor and oppressed relate to this state? What does oppression mean in relation to a state with a democratically elected government? How do citizens relate to the state, and what are the implications of the relationship between the state and those without citizenship in its borders for questions regarding liberation? At the heart of the conundrum is the ambiguity of the state in democratic South Africa – that it is simultaneously named at the heart of ongoing oppression yet called on as vehicle for alleviating suffering.⁶²

Without denying the possible task of theology and Christian witness in a reformist relationship with the state, working to inform policy and governance to align more close with a Christian vision of justice and peace, a liberation theology will be found accompanying the resistant protest against the state for the sake of forcing the state to act according to the mandate it was given, or to shift this mandate towards a more just focus, or else accompanying a political vision which refuses the power of the state and build people’s movements outside of the power of the state. Katongole’s reminder that the seeming failure of the nation-state in Africa is not failure, but in fact the nation-state functioning exactly as it is intended to function is vital here – as well as his call for rediscovering the church as political reality in Africa.⁶³

Vuyani Vellem’s brief exploration of a possible relationship between radical democracy and black theology of liberation⁶⁴ illustrates aspects of the changing relationship between liberation theologies and the democratic state in South Africa. While mostly concerned with the question of liberation and capitalism, the exploration is born from grappling with the post-apartheid political dispensation and the seeming confusion of ideological lines – where those on the “left” are identified with a lifestyle of affluence and seen to be in alliance with a system of capital, while those on the “right” adopt the language of liberation. While Vellem’s argument is consistently hesitant – hesitant to make too easy equations between the two or too hastily make black theology of liberation dependent on radical democracy, he does conclude with the strong assertion of democracy:

This task of unveiling anti-democratic practices, particularly in relation to our Leftist discourse, is

urgent today. If the “crowds”, the lumpenproletariat, the millions of the poor who are unemployed, including those on state grants and the masses who are on service delivery strikes are sheer ‘excesses’ of the political settlement after Apartheid, then it is not their exclusion, but their participation in democracy that will provide radical tools with new nodal points of revolution to reclaim democracy itself to the people.⁶⁵

Vellem’s repudiation of anti-democratic tendencies among both the “left” and the “right” reminds of Freire’s similar rejection to two sides.⁶⁶ It is a continuation of the apartheid-era insistence on the role of “the people” as opposed to the state; however, the current dispensation makes a simplistic rejection of this state for another state impossible. The seeming contradiction in his call perhaps illustrates the difficulty. In one sentence he calls for both the “participation in democracy” of the “crowds” as well as to “reclaim democracy itself to the people”. Here the “crowds”, the millions of unemployed and disregarded, is the same group as “the people”, but there does seem to be a difference in emphasis from “participating in democracy” to “reclaiming democracy ... to”.⁶⁷ The tension between committing to the democracy that was won and protesting the democracy that remains out of reach is palpable.

South African theologies of liberation will have to think carefully about the role of and relationship with the state for the future. Indeed, it will have to carefully articulate a political theology. Steven Martin’s recent exploration of the relationship between political theology and South African public theology might illustrate part of what is at stake. Martin’s assumption is that public theology captures the dominant theological approach after apartheid and then asks what South African public theology might gain from political theology, which is a concept engaged less often in South Africa.⁶⁸ However, an even more fruitful engagement might be possible between a new generation of liberation theologies and questions of political theology.

A key aspect of South African liberation theology in decades to come would then have to be the interrogation of the “South African” which delineates its focus, and indeed the focus of this project: how is the state to be considered, and what does a theology look like which does not locate politics in the state and its institutions? However, this is inevitably complicated by the fact that the state, regardless of its deeply problematic actions, is considered one of the only vehicles which can keep at bay the even more powerful forces of economic exploitation.⁶⁹

The most unequal society in the world

Perhaps nothing emphasises the need for a particular *liberation* theology in South Africa today more than the persistent, and according to some metrics worsening, economic inequality. South Africa has become a symbol of economic inequality in the world⁷⁰, with an impossible situation of extreme wealth and abject poverty existing side by side continuing decades after the end of legal apartheid. If anything, the spatial barriers between rich and poor that apartheid maintained has thinned in recent years, so that the stark contrasts are just becoming increasingly visible – at times with a single wall marking off two worlds.

The particularity of inequality – of poverty not existing in isolation, but in a context where resources are available but monopolised by the few – as a concern for theology is not new. This is persistently questioned in the Biblical tradition, a tradition which will repeatedly call those who claim to make this tradition authoritative to reflect critically on this reality in the present. In a context of global inequality this must be on the agenda of theology in the coming decades, but in the South African context this will have to receive particular attention.

Jung Mo Sung points to a shift in theological attention on the details of economic theory and policy. Where there used to be a time where theologians would have reflected on this, that is less often the case today.⁷¹ On the one hand, a call for theologians to attend to questions of the economy is not a licence for naivety to the complexity of contemporary economic systems. On the other hand, the often-repeated refrain that questions of economics are far too technical and that theologians (and other non-economists) should rather steer clear is also no longer acceptable. As Kathryn Tanner argues, a Christian critique of capitalism need to take account of the particular form it takes in the present and illustrate what the particular Christian response is that it calls forth.⁷²

Even while the negotiations in the early 1990s were ongoing, Takatso Mofokeng already noted that the transition will not end the immense suffering of the poorest of black South Africans.

In our country today, all economists of substance are already saying, long before the search for a just and peaceful solution to the problems of our country is completed, that the present generation of black people is doomed and condemned to remain permanently in poverty, ignorance and squalor and that nothing can be done to save them from that condition. They will remain nailed forever on the cross of poverty in the midst of glittering gold because bringing them from the cross will entail radical conversion to God and their black neighbour (accepting the humanity of black people) as well

as cross-bearing (reduction in the standard of living) for white people, and an accompanying radical structural change.⁷³

That the questions around poverty, inequality, and the labour market will be key to the challenge of a post-apartheid era has been and continues to be widely recognised. The debate around liberation theology in South Africa after apartheid – not disconnected from broader global debates – has however been whether the promised justice will be best achieved through the kind of radical structural change proposed by some, or in a more pragmatic paradigm of growth and eventual economic inclusion.

Charles Villa-Vicencio's name remain key in the shift towards an agenda of national reconstruction, and in this he has often been critiqued by those who insisted on the ongoing relevance of a liberation theology lens. Writing on the relationship between liberation and reconstruction shortly after the transition to democracy in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*⁷⁴, Villa-Vicencio turns most of his attention to questions of economics. The economic vision expanded on in his contribution to this volume gives content to the debate on reconstruction and liberation. Key is that Villa-Vicencio insists on a distance between theology and details of economic practice. At most theology provides an ethical frame with which to evaluate the economics, but its voice should be limited.⁷⁵ His economic vision assumes a “growth-oriented economy” with “fair distribution”⁷⁶, and a theology which questions this economic context is largely dismissed. Perhaps the most telling marker of the approach presented is found in pitting democracy and “doctrinaire” impulses against each other:

Bluntly stated, a utopian notion of an exclusive socialism that politically excludes those who promote the interests of rich and powerful is not a viable option. Democracy demands the recognition of difference and the right of dissent.⁷⁷



The rather lengthy engagement with Villa-Vicencio is mostly because of the place of the essay in a prominent text on liberation theology, and his own words in the midst of the above argument that this is what “liberation theology” should be doing. Villa-Vicencio’s entire argument is focused on the needs of the poor, yet it also presents a theological sanctification of the economic trajectory which in subsequent decades would become a key impetus for the ongoing insistence on the importance of a liberation trajectory in South Africa.

The two questions which matters of the economy should call forth for a liberation theology is first whether liberation *theology* as theology can speak to economic questions, and if so, then what its contribution should be. Second, as a *liberation* theology its emphasis must be on how the contemporary economy looks from the vantage of the majority of working-aged youth who remain unemployed, and the millions living below the poverty line.

What keeps liberation theology on the agenda like nothing else is, however, the experience around a persistent intergenerational injustice after apartheid. What Mofokeng could state about a “present generation” in 1993, could be repeated for another generation 30 years later, as youth unemployment skyrocketed to almost 75% during the 2020-2021 period of lock-down. Without needing to deny the fundamental changes that the end of legislative apartheid brought about, the justification for the need for a future for liberation theologies in South Africa (of theologies which actively resist the powers of oppression and indifference of the privileged) is found in the ongoing reality of people living in squalor, of millions living in absolute poverty, of food insecurity and the reality that the current trajectory provides no indication of an end in our lifetime.

Liberating invaded space

While the devastation of poverty, inequality, and unemployment decades into democracy most persistently reminds of the ongoing need for liberation, it is the “question of the land” that perhaps most persistently emphasises the historic and structural context which brought about this material and economic devastation. I’ve argued elsewhere that the particularly spatial nature of apartheid as a system of white supremacist oppression should call forth a particular emphasis on space and place in our reflections on its ongoing effects in the present and future.⁷⁸ But I also join those who remind that land and place have long been of deep concern for faith and theology.

Willie Jennings’ ground-breaking work on the intersection of race and theology traces how the colonial project

forms racialised bodies in tandem with the separation of bodies from land (either voluntarily or through force). A fundamental shift in the meaning of space and place occurs during colonialism and modernity as land is transformed from that which grounds being and identity into a commodity.⁷⁹ Simultaneously, the expropriation and theft of land through conquest and legislative mechanisms under colonial and apartheid rule has had disastrous material and economic consequences for those oppressed and dispossessed.

Vuyani Vellem indicates how the commodification of land continues throughout the transition and into the “current constitutional dispensation” in South Africa. This commodification is seen in the ongoing stories of evictions and relegating people to informal settlements. However, the response is simultaneously to not view land as a “source or tool of life” but as “part of life itself”.⁸⁰ This dual movement is vital. The history of private property disposes people not only of the material means of life but of the source of identity – any theological response to questions of land in South Africa must then incorporate indigenous views on what land is and should be.

The earth, land, place and space has been at the heart of Jewish and Christian faith and theological reflection throughout history. The challenge facing a next generation of liberation theologians remain how to construct a Christian theology of land which simultaneously addresses material questions of inequality as these are tied to ownership of land as well as the disruption of the very meaning of land and its relationship to identity. It spans concrete solidarity with movements of landless people and conceptual interrogation of the theological underpinnings and implications of modern visions of property ownership of the earth. This will have to simultaneously take account of the ecological destruction of the earth. Where the integrity of creation and justice for the oppressed have at times in the past been considered foci competing for priority, these are today recognised as intimately intertwined.

Theological education and research

The South African university has been fundamentally transformed by student movements and protests around the middle 2010s. These cannot be disconnected from broader global resistance movements, both in terms of the influence of the South African movements globally and it’s being influenced. It’s impact on academic theology in particular must still be accounted for; however, the numerous and ongoing publications in academic theological journals testify to the fact that this moment did not pass by the theological academy.⁸¹ This attention should however not necessarily imply a constructive engagement. Indeed, some theological

reflection has emerged in conversation and solidarity with the student movements calling for decolonisation; others heard the call and worked to listen and think through the implications for theological education, and still others sought a response which would carve out a place for the dominant traditions amidst a clear shifting of the ground. Regardless, the recognition that indeed the ground has shifted is found across a wide spectrum of voices.

The student protests raised questions around the colonial legacy of university systems and the epistemological assumptions governing a range of disciplines. That these were not new but that the academic community nonetheless recognised the need to respond with an ever-growing body of publications, perhaps reveals at least part of the problem. Freire's works were fundamental to the formation of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa; a moment in history that has received sustained attention in recent years, black theologies has been raising questions of theological curriculum for years past, and South African contextual theologies have in its own way been developing methods which commit to a deliberate commitment to working from the ground up. The need for reimagining theological education in recognition of the way it was intertwined in the colonial project has been named on the fringes of theological institutions for years. Theological educators in South Africa cannot claim that we "did not know" that this remains a vital priority, yet our response clearly indicates that we had to acknowledge that we did not step up to the task in the first decades after the end of legal apartheid. The developments over the past years have clearly revealed a recognition of a new sense of urgency to reimagine the future of theological education in ways that will be liberating and disruptive of colonial legacies.

Willie Jennings escalates the challenge for theological education in a liberative mode (while this may not be the word he uses; his work cannot be read outside of this trajectory either) as noting its formation within a broader problem of education and finding the resources to respond to this broader problem:

Distorted formation has been with the Western education for centuries, and now we have entered a moment when we might begin to address it. In fact, my goal in this essay is to point theological education toward a future beyond distorted formation. Even more ambitiously, I want to suggest that theological education carries the resources necessary to reframe Western education beyond this distortion.⁸²

I started this essay by recognising the tensions inherent in an academic argument engaging on the topic

“To some extent liberation theology, and its resurgence in more recent years, is a reminder that the structures of oppression that gave rise to what goes under the name liberation theology in the 20th century continues to live in the 21st century.”

requested. I conclude with this brief reminder that theological education and research will undoubtedly be one of the key points on the agenda of what was named as liberation theology in South Africa at least in part because this is the sphere that those of us most likely to read the argument up to this point is most likely to invest considerable time and energy into, and where we have a particular responsibility. Chapter by chapter Jennings' work quoted above will outline how theological education has been intertwined with a distorted formation of white self-sufficient masculinities⁸³ and the perpetuation of the conviction that all the world should be known through Europe.⁸⁴ The crisis of a university caught up in a modern economic logic has received sustained attention from a variety of places in recent years⁸⁵, and the crisis of a theological education which sells out to this logic should not be underestimated. The challenge facing theology in South Africa, since that is the focus of this project, would then be to commit to a theological education that is liberating in the broadest sense. Rather than having liberative theologies, now understood in the broader frame sketched out in the first section, and including multiple perspectives, as a moment added to a curriculum, we are faced with a challenge to creatively imaging a theological curriculum that takes such a liberative commitment as what underpins all our work.

CONCLUSION

To some extent liberation theology, and its resurgence in more recent years, is a reminder that the structures of oppression that gave rise to what goes under the name liberation theology in the 20th century continues to live in the 21st century. Questions which some tried to relegate to the history of the mid-20th century remained of relevance, and remains of relevance where a vast section of humanity⁸⁶ is confronted with perpetual dehumanisation and early death and denied

the means and resources to have agency over their own lives. Such a reality is not merely a social problem to which a theological response is sought but is at heart a theological question – more so in a world where theological visions were deeply intertwined with the making of the modern world.

On the other hand, the 21st century is not the late 20th century. While questions of political and economic power, of conquest of land and education, remain of vital importance, there is also a recognition that the shift in the landscape of our societies will require fresh attention to these questions. South Africa, the “miracle” example of transitioning away from an authoritarian and racist regime, will remain a vital context from where liberative trajectories that speak to 21st century realities will need to be explored. The persistence of suffering and inequality has made abundantly clear that liberative theologies are not just a relic of the past, but a vital resource to be studied and developed in the present and into the future. In this essay, I hoped to illustrate some aspects of what may have to form part of such an agenda.

To conclude with a response to the place where this essay started, I want to remind of the last two positive affirmations from the Confession of Belhar⁸⁷ because it aptly captures in broad strokes the kind of theology proposed here:

We believe that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

First, that where we stand is vital. The task of theology should be that of discerning where God stands in contemporary struggles, and through this discernment accompany the church in standing in that place. Second, this implies a solidarity with those who have been wronged. Third, this implies a resistance to injustice and those perpetrating such injustice. Fourth, the rules and legal systems of those in power may not determine the boundaries of this discernment and solidarity and this discernment may not be limited by those in power and the legal systems governing this world. Fifth, there may at times be consequences to this stand, because it inevitably requires a ‘no’ to authorities that perpetuate injustice in this world.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cobus van Wyngaard is Associate Professor in Systematic Theology at the University of South Africa.
- 2 Louis R. Van der Riet and G.J. (Cobus) Van Wyngaard, “The other side of whiteness: The Dutch Reformed Church and the search for a theology of racial reconciliation in the afterlife of apartheid”, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (2021), p. 18.
- 3 George Jacobus Van Wyngaard, “The (non) acceptance of Belhar in the Dutch Reformed Church: Analysing Synodical Debates of 2011 and 2013”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45 (2019), pp. 1-21.
- 4 James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 215. Perkinson makes this point in relation to white people engaging questions on black theology and white racism, emphasising the importance of grappling with whiteness in lifelong community and joint struggle towards justice.
- 5 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding. An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), p. 18.
- 6 David Bosch’s use of “contextual theologies proper” (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2004), p. 421) largely overlaps with those theological threads usually names as “liberation theology”, and an even more direct link between liberation and contextual in South Africa will be highlighted below. On the other hand, Steven Bevens’ *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), rightly in my opinion, would make liberation theologies – however understood – one particular relationship with contextual questions, and not the only valid approach.
- 7 Joseph, Ogbonnaya, “African Liberative Theologies” in Migual A. De La Torre (ed.), *Introducing Liberative Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), p. 27.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 9 Theo Witvliet, *A Place in the Sun* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985).
- 10 Mario I. Aguilar, “The Hermeneutics of the Bones: Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century” in Thia Cooper (ed.), *The Reemergence of Liberation Theology: Models for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 32-33.
- 11 Gerald West, “Liberation Hermeneutics after Liberation in South Africa”, *Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations* 48 (2014), pp. 48, 348.
- 12 Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age. An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 13 In her detailed intellectual history of liberation theology, Lilian Barger identifies a similar resurgence globally (Barger, 2018, p. 260). Numerous shifts in global consciousness can indeed be identified from the time since the 2008 global recession: the occupy movement, #BlackLivesMatter, #FeesMustFall, and perhaps of most significance the global environmental movement. Deeply conscious of the fact that this is but the tip of the iceberg, we could add multiple indigenous movements and the LGBTQI2 movement. While the differences between these should not be ignored, it seems to be clear that resistance to the status quo is both widespread and deeply rooted in many communities. A resurgence of theological reflection on such resistance should then not come as a surprise.
- 14 Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “The Elusive Public of Public Theology: A Response to William Storrar”, *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011), p. 84.
- 15 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Liberation Theology for Armshair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), pp. 1-20.
- 16 Ogbonnaya, 2016, pp. 36-37.
- 17 West, 2014, pp. 360-364. Here contextual theology should not be confused with a more general understanding of the term of doing theology in context, but rather with a particular methodological commitment – what Nico Botha (Nico Botha, “If everything is contextual, nothing is contextualisation: Historical methodological and epistemological perspectives”, *Missionalia* 31, no. 2,

(2010), pp. 181-196) describes by distinguishing between contextual theology and contextuality – the distinction between a general acknowledgement of theology as emerging from context versus the explicit and constructive development of theologies from a particular context. But second, West’s Contextual Theology is about a particular epistemological commitment and methodological approach – a preferential option for the poor which calls for an emphasis on social analysis and liberating praxis.

- 18 West names Nolan as one pole of Contextual Theology in South Africa, but then continues to list the other poles as the Institute of Contextual Theology, where Nolan was attached and in which he played a pivotal role, the Kairos Document, which Nolan played a pivotal role in drafting (this is not West’s point, but is important to note nonetheless (see Philippe Denis, “The Authorship and Composition Circumstances of the Kairos Document”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 158 (2017), pp. 4-19) and the See-Judge-Act method, which West describes as the most important contemporary pole for Contextual Theology, but which he simultaneously links back to Kairos and the ICT for its South African development.

The point is that for West, Nolan is not just one pole, but in fact a primary figure weaving together Contextual Theology as one stream of South African liberation theology.

- 19 The choice for the graphic of Station XVI of Azaria Mbatha’s Stations of The Cross for Africa is then exactly because of its explicitly global political call for the restructuring of the world situated within the passion narrative, resurrection faith, and as I argue elsewhere, vision of a hoped-for future after the end of apartheid (G.J. (Cobus) Van Wyngaard, *In search of repair: Critical white responses to whiteness as a theological problem. A South African contribution* (Amsterdam: Unpublished PhD, Vrije Universiteit, 2019), pp. 72-77).
- 20 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *The National Interest* 16 (1989), pp. 1-18.
- 21 Daniel M. Bell, *Liberation Theology After the End of history* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.
- 22 David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 23 West, 2014, p. 342.
- 24 See Barger’s discussion of the 1975 Detroit event and the description of the problem of “The American Empire” (Barger, 2018, p. 240)
- 25 Jeorg Rieger, *Christ & Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 3.
- 26 Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today. A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2006), p. 31.
- 27 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality”. October 23. Accessed November 26, 2016. http://frantzfanonfoundation-fondationfrantzfanon.com/IMG/pdf/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16.pdf, p. 10.
- 28 I will return to this in the section on theological education below, but the result of the growing awareness of the inevitable importance of the ongoing question on the afterlife of colonialism has in part been that attention has been given to these concepts from a wide variety of people – not least in theology.
- 29 Ibid., 10.
- 30 Jeorg Rieger, “Theology and Mission Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism”, *Mission Studies* 21, no. 1 (2004), p. 207.
- 31 Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2020).
- 32 Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 10.
- 33 Vuyani S. Vellem, 2017. “Un-thinking the West: The spirit of doing Black Theology of Liberation in decolonial times”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017).
- 34 These different positions and analyses continue to surface right into the present, as they impact on evaluations of the transition to

democracy, persistent racism after apartheid, economic transformation, land ownership, and numerous other pressing issues.

- 35 See for example Botman's discussion of the recognition of specifically apartheid as theological problem (H. Russel Botman, "Barmen to Belhar: A contemporary confessing journey", *NGTT* 47, no. 1 and 2 (2006), p. 240) or Nolan's overview of the emergence of a theological rejection of apartheid (Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), p. 2). The diverse set of views all agreeing on this fundamental point is perhaps best captured in the collection of essays in *Apartheid is a Heresy* (John W. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Apartheid Is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1983).
- 36 This history has been covered extensively over many decades (e.g., John W. De Gruchy and Steve De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SCM Press, 2004); Richard Elphick, *The equality of believers* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), but it is worth recalling that the 1983 South African Constitution not only acknowledged God as the one to whom the country is responsible, but also made it a national goal to "uphold Christian values and civilized norms" (<https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/republic-south-africa-constitution-act-110-1983>).
- 37 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Volume 2, Book IV (New York: Columbai University Press, 2011), pp. 199-210.
- 38 Jeorg Rieger, "Context Is What Hurts: Rethinking Contextual Theology in the Light of Empire and Economics" in Thia Cooper (ed.), *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies: Models for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 19.
- 39 Botha, 2010.
- 40 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 21.
- 41 Nolan, 1988, pp. 163-166.
- 42 Denis, 2017.
- 43 West, 2014, p. 8.
- 44 Vuyani Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of liberation in the 21st century: A reflection", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 38 (2012); Elina Hankela, "Faith community as a centre of liberationist praxis in the city", *HTS Teologiese* 70, no 3 (2014), pp. 3-4.
- 45 Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (Hants: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 87-97.
- 46 This section draws on an earlier and expanded discussion of Mofokeng's Christology (Van Wyngaard, 2019, pp. 165-181).
- 47 Takatso A. Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1983), p. 243; Takatso A. Mofokeng, "A black Christology: A new beginning", *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 1, no. 1 (1987), p. 13.
- 48 Mofokeng, 1983, pp. 75-81.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 50 Takatso A. Mofokeng, "The Crucified and Permanent Crossbearing: A Christology for Comprehensive Liberation", *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 7, no. 1 (1993), p. 30.
- 51 Takatso A. Mofokeng, "The Future Image of South African Black Theology", *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 7, no. 2 (1993), pp. 144-145.
- 52 Mofokeng, 1983, pp. 145-182.
- 53 Mofokeng, 1983, p. 85. The risk of the language of solidarity should not be missed. Solidarity as an idea can too easily become one more mechanism through which those in positions of relative privilege – which would include the academic class – "talk for ... or on behalf of" the poor (S'bu Zikode, "The Homemade Politics of Abahlali Basemjondolo, South Africa's Shack Dweller Movement", *Tricontinental Dossier* 11 (2018). https://thetricontinental.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/190812_Dossier-11_EN_Web.pdf, p. 30).

- 54 Mofokeng, 1993, p. 29.
- 55 I write this deeply conscious of the fact that the “success” of the struggle for liberation in South Africa is far removed from the life of the majority of people – in fact, this illusory success is perhaps exactly what drives the reflection below. Modiri speaks of the afterlife of apartheid (Joel M. Modiri, *The jurisprudence of Steve Biko: A study in race law and power in the “afterlife” of colonial-apartheid* (Unpublished PhD, University of Pretoria, 2017), the ways in which apartheid continues to have a life after the end of the legal system from which the country transitioned in 1994, and Mpofu-Walsh of the ways in which apartheid continues to live in privatised form (Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2021). Writing on Nelson Mandela, historian Phil Bonner (Phil Bonner, “The antinomies of Nelson Mandela” in Rita Barnard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 29-49) speaking to the legacy that has become highly contested in the present, perhaps captures the longer-term debate by noting that future history will continue to return to the transition period in evaluating Nelson Mandela, but we can here add the broader liberation movement. Yet, it is exactly this contestation that is at the heart of any reflection on liberation theology today: since it is on the other side of one particular movement for liberation that we need to think through the future of liberation theology, and at the heart of it is the process of learning from the sense of disillusionment that many experience.
- 56 A younger generation of citizens, activists, and theologians, of which I am part, might too easily forget just how recently universal suffrage was introduced in many countries, with many countries only allowing all (white) women to vote during the 20th century and voting rights regardless of race or ethnicity only following in years or decades later. Debates around voter registration and mail-in ballots was again in the spotlight in recent elections in the United States of America and revealed the persistence of ongoing struggles around voting.
- 57 It should not be ignored that the same document envisioned a democratisation of wealth and the economy, and that the tension between democratic governance and monopolistic economic structures continues into the present.
- 58 Julian Brown, *South Africa’s Insurgent Citizens: On Dissent and the Possibility of Politics* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2015), p. 3.
- 59 Seungbum Kim, *The SACC and Democracy in Post 1994 South Africa* (Unpublished Masters Dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2017), pp. 64-69; Vuyani S. Vellem, *The Symbol of Liberation in South African Public Life: A Black Theological Perspective* (Unpublished PhD, University of Pretoria, 2007), pp. 366-367.
- 60 Vellem, while fiercely critical of this notion, also reminds that this was not the official position of the SACC, in spite of the popularity of the idea (Vuyani S. Vellem, “Ecumenicity and Black Theology of Liberation” in Ernst M. Conradie (ed.) *South African Perspectives on Notions and Forms of Ecumenicity* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013), p. 178).
- 61 Vellem, 2013, p. 177; Jonathan Michael Womack and Jerry Pillay, “The SACC since 1994: Ecumenism in Democratic South Africa”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45, no. 2 (2019), p. 6.
- 62 This ambiguity is seen for example in an interview with S’Bu Zikobe from Abahlali baseMjondolo. While on the one hand describing the problem of the state in terms of the way it creates a structure of dependency – and describing their own work in contrast with this creation of dependency (Zikode, 2018, p. 27) – on the other hand he describes the need for land occupations by noting the failure of state action to bring change in terms of housing for the poor (Zikode, 2018, p. 11).
- 63 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2011).
- 64 Vuyani Vellem, “Black Theology of Liberation and Radical Democracy: A Dialogue”, *Scriptura* 114 (2015), pp. 1-13.
- 65 Ibid., 12.
- 66 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 20.
- 67 Vellem, 2015, p. 12.

- 68 Stephen Martin, "Political Theology and Public Theology in South Africa: Beginning a Conversation" (2021), https://www.academia.edu/43429919/Political_Theology_and_Public_Theology_in_South_Africa_Beginning_a_Conversation.
- 69 That the nation-state is in fact part and parcel of the facilitation of this economic exploitation is not denied, but just adds to the difficult conundrum that should draw our attention in years to come.
- 70 While a detailed discussion on the particular structures shown in the image does add some nuance, the Time Magazine cover with an aerial photo of the stark inequalities existing back-to-back in South Africa remind of the place of South Africa as example of the extremity of inequality in the world. Those familiar with South African cities will be able to point out multiple local examples where extreme wealth and extreme poverty exist side-by-side.
- 71 Jung Mo Sung, "Theology, Spirit, and the Imperial Economic System" in Thia Cooper (ed.), *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 29.
- 72 Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 73 Mofokeng, 1993, p. 24.
- 74 Villa Vicencio's essay was reprinted in subsequent editions but was originally published in the 1999 edition of the book.
- 75 Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Liberation and reconstruction: The unfinished agenda" in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 164.
- 76 Ibid., 165.
- 77 Ibid., 168.
- 78 Van Wyngaard, 2019, pp. 254-257.
- 79 Jennings, 2010, pp. 15-118.
- 80 Vuyani Vellem, "Epistemological Dialogue as Prophetic: A Black Theological Perspective on the Land Issue", *Scriptura* 115 (2016), p. 8.
- 81 An exhaustive list of publications is impossible, but the impact is perhaps illustrated by this initial list:

Felipe G.K Buttelli and Clint Le Bruyns, "#FeesMustFall as social movement and emancipatory politics? Moving towards an apocalyptic theological praxis outside the limits of party politics", *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017); Felipe Gustavo Koch Buttelli and Clint Le Bruyns, "Decolonising Theology from #Feesmustfall and #Foratemer", *Religion and Theology* 25, no. 1 and 2 (2018), pp. 46-71; Lisa Grassow and Clint Le Bruyns, "Embodying human rights in #FeesMustFall? Contributions from an indecent theology". *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017); Selena Headley and Sandiswa Lerato Kobe, "Christian activism and the fallists: What about reconciliation?", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017), pp. 1-11; Sandiswa Lerato Kobe, "Black theology of liberation (Is it the) thing of the past? A theological reflection on black students' experiences", *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 46, no. 2 (2018), pp. 288-303; Daniel J. Louw, "'Black pain is a white commodity': Moving beyond postcolonial theory in practical theology: #CaesarMustFall!", *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017); Vhumani Magezi, "A public practical-theological response and proposal to decolonisation discourse in South Africa: From #YourStatueMustFall and #MyStatueShouldBeErected to #BothOurStatuesShouldBeErected", *HTS Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018); Dumisane Methula, "Decolonising the commercialisation and commodification of the university and theological education in South Africa", *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017); Lodewyk Sutton, "When The Unheard Voices Become Violent. Perspectives From Psalm 109 And The #FeesMustFall Movement", *Acta Theologica* 39, Suppl. 27 (2019), pp. 39-66; Jakub Urbaniak, "Faith of an Angry People: Mapping a Renewed Prophetic Theology in South Africa", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 157 (2017), pp. 7-43; Jakub Urbaniak, "Theologians and Anger in the Age of Fallism: Towards a Revolution of African Love", *Black Theology: An International Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017), pp. 87-111; Nico Vorster, "Reformed theology and 'decolonised' identity. Finding a grammar for peaceful

coexistence”, *HTS Theological Studies* 74, no. 4 (2018); Robert Vosloo, “Pedagogy After Babel: Reading After Whiteness ‘After’ Apartheid”, *Modern Theology* 37, no. 4 (2021).

The broad section of academic theologians who, at least in words, indicated some sense of support for the student movements in 2016 should also be noted.

82 Jennings, 2020, p. 5.

83 *Ibid.*, 7.

84 *Ibid.*, 120.

85 Ex. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The Imperative of Decolonizing the Modern Westernized University” in Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi Siphamandla (eds.), *Decolonizing the University, Knowledge Systems and Disciplines in Africa* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2016), pp. 27-43; Raewyn Connell, *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why Its Time for Radical Change* (London: Zed Books, 2019).

86 As the essay focusing on ecotheology would undoubtedly point out, this can also be expanded to include the earth community broader than humanity.

87 West briefly notes the importance of Belhar in particular, but together with other confessing trajectories, as another stream of South African liberation theologies (West, 2014, pp. 364-365). As his former colleague Steve de Gruchy notes, Belhar and Kairos represent different ecclesiological premises (Steve M. De Gruchy, “On not abandoning church theology: Dirk Smit on church and politics”, *NGTT* 48, no. 1 and 2 (2007), pp. 356-265), and West notes the importance of this confessing trajectory of liberation theologies in terms of its location within particular church traditions. My own turn to the language of Belhar in conclusion also cannot be divorced from a formation and participation – even when in protest of – in a particular denominational tradition. Still, the words noted here should be such that all those professing faith in Jesus Christ should be able to draw from them.



**‘STATION 16 –
RECONCILIATION’**

AZARIA MBATHA

