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(Post)colonial theology in South Africa? A conversation with recent South African theology at the forefront of the decolonial turn

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Abstract

This article endeavours a preliminary dialogue with theologies which seriously and explicitly contemplate the decolonial turn. As decolonial and postcolonial become important concepts for framing the context, questions must be asked with regards to the meaning(s), grounds for theologising and undercurrents of the conversations on these subjects. There is no doubt that the current theological direction which seriously consider decolonial and postcolonial thought will influence the future of theology. However, the framing, interpretation, and contextual framing of decolonial and postcolonial thought cannot go without serious interrogation from a wide variety of voices for the future of theology in South Africa. In this sense, this article hopes for endeavours of contemplating the framing of theological discourse within the concepts of decolonial and postcolonial.

Keywords

Decolonial; postcolonial; epistemology; perspectives; identity

1. Introduction

The idea of decolonisation, especially the decolonisation of institutions and curricula, has gained massive support in recent years. Decolonisation has become an essential subject of academic and theological engagement. However, ideas of decolonisation have been present since the work of Frantz Fanon in the 1960s. A first instinct of the interaction between decolonisation and theology in South Africa would be to historically trace the exchange from the earliest onset of ideas on decolonisation. However, direct interaction between theology and decolonisation in South

Africa is resoundingly absent. I am unaware of South African theological engagement with decolonisation before the late 2010s.[1]

There is thus a problem of timeliness. Why are there only now such overwhelming interest in decolonisation? When I enquired about doing a PhD in Homiletics in 2017 at the University of Pretoria, I asked which themes were important to study. The answer was: *postcolonial thought*. I endeavoured and completed a PhD thesis in postcolonial homiletics in 2020. However, to engage in some self-critique, why was postcolonial thought at the cutting edge of importance in 2017, over 50 years after the first critical postcolonial insights were crafted? Was the interest in the postcolonial merely a late addendum to the theological landscape? After all, theology is often (jokingly) referred to as a discipline late to the party. However, might there not be other reasons and impetuses for the importance of decolonisation at this time and the present? And must there not be a critical conversation on both what the intersection between theology and decolonisation brings to the table and why it is important at this historical time?

This is my[2] endeavour in this article. A conversation about what is going on in theology regarding decolonial: and why it is going on currently. To accomplish this endeavour, I will first define what I mean by decolonisation, choosing (post)colonial thought as the focal image. After that, I will

1 This point is only valid if there is a distinction between liberation theologies and decolonisation. I have opined in my PhD that liberation theologies are decolonial in some aspects but are colonial in others. See Wessel Wessels, "Postcolonial Homiletics? A Practical Theological Engagement with Postcolonial Thought" (University of Pretoria, 2020).

2 Three remarks on my own positionality are of importance, taking cognisance of the importance of locating oneself and articulating subjectivity. Firstly, with regards to the current system of thought on identity within the academic environment, I will be considered to be a privileged cisgendered, white male. Secondly, I am a young homiletic theologian who is acutely interested in and curious about theological consciousness which forms (and malforms) human behaviour, hoping to participate in a meaningful way towards that which has the potential to be a good force in the world. Thirdly, notwithstanding my obvious flaws and shortcomings, I have endeavoured and continue to endeavour to participate in local communities, both formally and informally, in a manner which transcends the apartheid and colonial worldviews.

converse with South African theological contemplation on postcolonial studies *vis-à-vis* the definitions proposed.[3]

2. (Post)colonial thought as decolonisation

Before proposing a definition of (post)colonial thought, I must explain my preference for the terminology of postcolonial *vis-à-vis* decolonial. There are some contentions with regards to these identifying terms and adequate interaction for decolonisation. Edward Said locates decolonial as the historical and political resistance to colonisation and subsequent liberation of colonies after WWII.[4] Walter Mignolo makes a geographical distinction between decolonial thought and postcolonial thought, claiming that decolonial thinking emerges in the historical intersection with coloniality in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, whilst postcolonial thought is located in French post-structuralism.[5]

These are valuable distinctions, but Mignolo's discrepancy raises some concerns. For one, if Mignolo's distinction is to be followed, one cannot intertwine and integrate decolonial and postcolonial thinking. Secondly, in my reading of both schools of thought, similar foundational themes come to the fore. With these concerns on the table, I perceive on the one hand epistemological redundancy. To contemplate each school of thought on its own would be to repeat critical aspects of the other. On the other hand, to claim the incompatibility of these schools of thought would go against the grain of the second foundational theme prevalent in both schools, the necessity for a plurality of centres of thought.[6]

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3 This being said, my endeavour is to continue the conversation around decolonisation and not an attempt to locate myself as the authority of the decolonial theological discourse.

4 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 198.

5 Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World,* 1, no. 2 (2011):46.

6 Both Mignolo and Wa Thiong'o claim the move towards a plurality of centres as imperative in their respective decolonial and postcolonial thinking endeavours. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies,* 21, no. 2–3 (2007):453; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993), 17.

Thus, in the attempt to integrate and conceptualise three foundational themes for discussion, I choose the term of (post)colonial thought rather than either postcolonial or decolonial. Two reasons suffice. Firstly, (post) colonial more adequately showcases the permeability of the colonial past in terms of linguistics. The colonial history is still present in many forms today, and the post and Chevrons in (post)colonial adequately portray this permeability in linguistic terms.[7] Secondly, (post)colonial opens a space for interrelating the schools of decolonial and postcolonial thinking, adequately relaying the fundamental theme of a plurality of centres that influence and fertilise each other.

3. (Post)colonial thought

Three crucial works in (post)colonial thought are to my mind adequate for a framework and definition of (post)colonial thought: Two books of Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Decolonising the Mind*[8] and *Moving the Centre*[9]. And the work of Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*[10].

These three works capture three fundamental themes[11] of (post)colonial thought: a (post)colonial epistemology, a (post)colonial centre, and a (post) colonial identity.

2.1. A (Post)colonial Epistemology: The Decolonisation of the Mind

As located in the theme of the decolonisation of the mind, (post)colonial epistemology is a twofold movement. Firstly, it is the naming and deconstruction of colonial consciousness. The colonial consciousness

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7 Here I follow in Hook's footsteps with regards to his bracketing of (post)apartheid. See D. Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

8 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1986).

9 Wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*.

10 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

11 Other postcolonial theorists locate as many as fourteen themes of postcolonial theory. (See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 14–15). Granted, there are more themes within postcolonial thought. However, the three themes I have discerned encapsulate the other themes to a large extent. It gives us a more focused foundation to discern postcolonial thought in the South African theological landscape.

is a worldview that encapsulates a tyrannical force as the status quo. In the work of Walter Mignolo, the colonial mindset is cast in the form of modernity. He explains it as follows:

> It is a question of uncovering the origin of what I call 'the myth of modernity' itself. Modernity includes a rational 'concept' of emancipation that we affirm and subsume. But, at the same time, it develops an irrational myth, a justification for genocidal violence. The postmodernists criticize modern reason as a reason of terror; we criticize modern reason because of the irrational myth that it conceals.[12]

What modernity conceals, according to Mignolo, is Europe as the beneficiary of human wellbeing. Stated differently, it is Europe that benefits from modernity at the violent expense of other people. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o showcases how the prominence of European language in the curricula of schools and universities in Africa, interrelated with the reality that these languages open the doors to participation in global commerce, undermines the way African people view themselves.[13] Thus, in this line of thinking, the curricula located European language and culture as the pinnacle of human existence in the world. The outcome was inevitably this, that African culture and language was understood as subaltern – and thus the identity of African people as irrelevant and marginal. Herein lies the colonisation of people, that they see themselves as less than the epistemological centre of Europe and European humanity.

Frantz Fanon argues from a reference point of development, claiming that any form of development of a community's infrastructure without such development being correlated to the skills and work of the community should be withstood. Fanon believes that development should bring forth the enrichment (read decolonisation) of the consciousness of the workers in the community.[14]

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12 Walter Mignolo, 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality. *Cultural Studies,* 21, no. 2–3 (2007):454; cf. Mignolo, "Cosmopolitanism and the De-Colonial Option," *Studies in Philosophy and Education,* 29, no. 2 (2010):111–27.

13 Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 88.

14 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched Of The Earth,* 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 141.

The first part of the decolonisation of the mind is thus the naming and thorough expansion on any mindset that explicitly or implicitly undermines people's agency and wellbeing and thus brings about chaos. The naming of this mindset could be myriad. Although postcolonial and decolonial thought has often located such a mindset under the terminology of modernity, colonisation, and imperialism, the spirit of (post)colonial thought makes it possible to criticise any mindset or worldview which destabilises or malformed the wellbeing of people. To my understanding, the (post)colonial epistemology is the deconstruction of any totalitarian ideology.[15]

Thus, this brings me to the second movement of the decolonisation of the mind, the construction of a new and alternative mindset. Taking the queue from the previously mentioned interlocutors, alternative consciousness is placed on the table as follows. Mignolo speaks of the decolonisation of the mind and imagination, the decolonisation of knowledge and being.[16] In this line of thought, Mignolo proposes an "epistemic shift" which "brings to the foreground […] other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy [sic], other politics, other ethics."[17] Mignolo's understanding of the decolonisation of the mind lies in the possibility of foregrounding other epistemological ways and means of understanding and administrating the world.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o locates the decolonisation of the mind in a slightly different manner than Mignolo. He focusses not so much on the other possibilities which may arise but on the process of bringing about new possibilities of existence and knowledge:

> [This book] is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle. It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history. Struggle. Struggle

15 It should be mentioned that *decolonial or postcolonial* itself can become totalitarian ideologies. Still, the spirit of (post)colonial thought withstands such a movement, and it is of utmost importance that vigilance is kept so decolonial or postcolonial thought does not become totalitarian.

16 Mignolo, "Delinking," 450.

17 Ibid., 453.

> makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language, and our being.[18]

The emphasis is placed not on the outcomes of the decolonisation of the mind but on the struggle of searching for new ways of existing in the world. Fanon's understanding of development as the enrichment of the people's consciousness[19] similarly emphasises with Wa Thiong'o the process of decolonising the mind, rather than the outcomes of such a process.

Thus, the second movement of the decolonisation of the mind could be seen as both the process of different knowledge and being struggling towards newness and the newness that enters the world through such struggle. It must be mentioned that postcolonial and decolonial thought, to a large extent, has shied away from contemplating the ethical implications of the outcomes of a decolonisation of the mind. In one sense, this may merely be because of the theoretical nature of a decolonised mind. That it has not yet taken place to a prominent enough extent to understand the implications thereof. On the other hand, it may be a conviction that decolonisation will only move towards wellbeing. The second possibility needs scrutiny as not to oversimplify the complexity of reality and human fallacy, which may lead to new types of totalitarian ideology.

Nevertheless, in the second theme of (post)colonial thought, we find the possibility of dialogue regarding the implications of the decolonisation of the mind – moving the centre.

2.2. A (Post)colonial Centre: Myriad Legitimate Centres

The moving of the centre is a twofold epistemological movement. Firstly, it is the shift away from the myth that Europe is the centre of the world. And secondly, the shift towards a myriad of legitimate centres of thought, with the understanding that these centres can mutually interact and fertilise each other.

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18 Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 108.

19 Fanon, *The Wretched Of The Earth*, 141.

In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's book, *Moving the Centre*, he relays that the colonial mindset located Europe as the centre of human existence and thought.[20] To make it clear, Wa Thiong'o goes on to state the following:

> It was not a question of substituting one centre for the other. The problem arose only when people tried to use the vision from any one centre and generalise it as the universal reality.[21]

Thus, to locate the centre in human existence and thought in any one centre as universal would not constitute an adequate and viable (post)colonial stance. Stated differently, any one centre that claims itself as universal, even from the margins of human existence, would constitute a colonial stance.[22] Wa Thiong'o then relays what he believes would be the moving of the centre:

> But it did point out the possibility of moving the centre from its location in Europe towards a pluralism of centres; themselves being equally legitimate locations of the human imagination.[23]

And herein lies the (post)colonial imagination, to imagine a myriad of centres as legitimate with the possibility that all centres should mutually influence and augment each other. A person or community can, therefore, legitimately think and theorise from their specific centre of thought, with the caveat and responsibility to conceptualise how their centre relates and dialogues with other centres of thought.

Moving the centre, therefore, incorporates a responsibility of engagement and negotiation *vis-à-vis* other centres. These centres and the negotiation of centres, therefore, beckons contemplation on identity.

2.3. A (post)colonial Identity: decentred and fragmented

This brings me to the third theme of postcolonial thought: a postcolonial identity. Homi Bhabha names the postcolonial identity as decentred and

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20 Wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, 17.

21 Ibid., 22.

22 It would be viable to discredit specific interpretations of liberation theology as (post) colonial theology because liberation theology tends to locate a marginalised centre as universal.

23 Wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, 26.

fragmented.[24] He explains this decentred and fragmented identity as follows:

> What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out', remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender, or race. Such assignations of social differences – where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between* – find their agency in a form of the 'future' where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present.[25]

To be clear, Bhabha refers to both the hybridity of identity as the birth of children with parents from differing cultural backgrounds and the hybridity of identity within the framework of pluralistic spaces of interaction amongst people of a variety of lived experiences. In this line of thinking, the conceptualisation of simplistic identity markers becomes problematic and irrelevant regarding people's lived experience. Instead, as Bhabha goes on to relay, the decentred and fragmented identity is closely related to the agency of hope and survival within the conceptual framework of reality:

> If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. To dream not of the past or present, nor the continuous present; it is not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; it is the dream of translation as 'survival' as Derrida translates the 'time' of Benjamin's concept of the afterlife of translation, as *sur-vivre*, the act of living on borderlines.[26]

Even more nuanced, Bhabha located the postcolonial identity in the location of the migrant whose survival depends on "how newness enters the world".[27] Thus, if identity, both in the emergence of people who cannot be classified into identity categories of the past, intersecting with the peculiarity of the

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24 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 309.

25 Ibid., 313, original italics.

26 Ibid., 324, original italics.

27 Ibid.

situation of migration, combined with a hybridity of identity formation in a pluralistic world, is to be taken seriously, some essential factors come to the fore.

Firstly, the polarisation of identities as proposed by critical theorists must be reconsidered. Aimé Césaire showcases that colonisation did not only inflict death and pain on the colonised but also brutalised the coloniser.[28] He makes it clear that colonisation was not the altruistic endeavour it has proposed itself to be, but a world scale extension of "the competition of […] antagonistic economies".[29] As a result of this, the colonial identity is seen as a degradation of human potential towards the "awaken[ing] [of] buried instincts, [of] covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism".[30] Regarding identity formation, Césaire is optimistic about the outcome of different civilisations near one another (a feature of colonisation), where the possibility comes to the fore that they could intersect and influence one another, thereby opening the possibility for hybridity in identity.[31] Returning to my point of reconsidering the polarisation of identities, Césaire opens the possibility that both colonised and coloniser were victims of colonisation, although in differing ways and degrees. But the point is clear; the colonial enterprise undermined the human potential of all people.

This brings me to a second point that must be reconsidered. The prevalence of victimhood as a principal locator of human existence. As can be expounded from both Bhabha and Wa Thiong'o, the importance of survival and struggle for the (post)colonial subject moves away from victimhood towards agency. The (post)colonial identity does not dress itself up in the search or determination to showcase how it is the most extraordinary victim of all or a victim at all. But the (post)colonial identity moves towards active agency in the world in a struggle to bring about the necessary newness to realise its survival and flourishing.

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28 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972) , 35.

29 Ibid., 33.

30 Ibid., 35.

31 Ibid., 33.

Thirdly, the (post)colonial identity calls forward the active endeavour of taking up a (post)colonial identity. Even those who seemingly exist in the confounds of fixed identity are called towards becoming the other of themselves and living into the (post)colonial identity. But the point is even more precarious, for the myth that there exists such a thing as a fixed identity is unveiled. And herein, the (post)colonial identity showcases the human condition, that identity is constantly in flux and negotiated, decentred, and fragmented.

4. (Post)colonial thought in South African theology

The best viable course to converse about (post)colonial insights in theology is a conversation with contemporary theologians who explicitly categorise their work as part of the decolonial project. In this sense, I have identified the following three theologians: Vuyani Vellem, Chris Vorster, and Teddy Sakupapa.[32] My endeavour is twofold: a short description of the key aspect(s) of each theologian's decolonial project and critical conversation from the perspective of the (post)colonial insights described above.

3.1. Vuyani Vellem: A Move beyond Black Theology of Liberation

The late Vuyani Vellem has located himself thoroughly in the tradition of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL). However, in an interview with Martin Laubscher, Vellem explicitly articulates his decolonial project as going beyond BTL:

32 This list is not comprehensive regarding South African theologians who contemplate decolonial theology, especially if one includes implicit decolonial thought and smaller corpora of thought. In an upcoming project of genealogically mapping decolonial thought, I intend to include Tinyiko Maluleke, Jakub Urbaniak, and the late Gerrit Brand, amongst others. However, the three theologians I have proposed for conversation in this article are comprehensive in the variety of theological perspectives they pursue in their endeavours. It should also be noted that the voices of women are not included in this article. This is not because of ignorance or an explicit exclusion of women. As I limit this article to explicit contemporary contemplation on decolonial theology in South Africa, the lack of women's voices is merely a current reality and an opportunity for women to engage with decolonial thought. In an upcoming project, I will contemplate the voices of two international scholars who are both women and explicitly work with decolonial theology: Sarah Travis and Kwok Pui-lan.

> [T]he decolonial turn should be viewed as the context that led to this self-critical engagement with my own paradigm, BTL, *to move beyond* rearticulating and re-affirming its strong thought. [33]

This move beyond BTL is vital for the rest of the conversation with Vellem. However, I'll first consider Vellem's understanding of the strong thoughts of BTL. In an article titled, '*Un-thinking the West'*, Vellem articulates the strong thoughts of BTL around the "starting point" of BTL.[34] Here Vellem means the epistemological and hermeneutic interlocutor from where BTL is practised: "The black, the non-person, is the starting point of BTL and its finality, not the Western non-believer".[35] Two important decolonial points are made. Firstly, that the non-person constitutes an alternative centre to what can be considered the centre of the West. And secondly, Vellem postulates correctly that this alternative centre should bring about other ways of existing in the world:

> The poor [non-person] as a starting point means an urgent need to completely move beyond knowledge and models that are opaque, asleep and laugh mockingly at rather than affirm the lives of the victims.[36]

To be more precise, Vellem maintains that the non-person as the epistemological centre will bring about creativity and struggle for life towards dignified participation in God's creation in the world.[37]

But this brings me to three points of concern. Firstly, Vellem works with a prescriptive *ought* regarding where newness enters the world – the non-person as the epistemological centre of newness. Secondly, Vellem inadequately constitutes the non-person in reality and lived experience. And thirdly, Vellem's understanding of identity becomes a crucial issue.

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33 Vuyani Vellem and Martin Laubscher, "Interview with Vuyani S. Vellem," *Acta Theologica* 38, no 1 (2018):https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v38i1.1., 5, [my italics].

34 Vuyani Vellem, "Un-Thinking the West: The Spirit of Doing Black Theology of Liberation in Decolonial Times," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73(3):8.

35 Ibid., 9.

36 Ibid., 8.

37 Ibid., 8–9.

Let me begin with the first concern. My understanding of (post)colonial thought is firstly descriptive before it is prescriptive. This is what I mean: it describes how newness enters the world from what can be perceived as marginal centres; within the plurality of (surprising) human interaction, the locations of alternative centres, and the hybridity of identity created in these centres. To postulate, as Vellem does, that there should be a prescriptive location from whence newness *ought* to enter the world without the description of its existence is both a misconception of the (post)colonial project and the proposition of a new normative centre, which is colonial in its universality.

But I would have excused these shortcomings in Vellem's thoughts if it were not for his inability to locate his interlocutors in the South African context. Vellem is very capable of saying who the interlocutor of BTL is not and cannot be. But he struggles to locate BTL's interlocutor, especially with regards to his decolonial project. In an article titled '*Interlocution and Black Theology of liberation in the 21st century*',[38] he contemplated this very issue. Granted, this is before his move to a decolonial project, but the insights are essential.

His first significant insight as a description of what is going on was that the interlocutor in democratic South Africa has moved towards the black

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38 Vuyani Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae,* 38:1–9.in the methodological debates that were associated with who the interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation was, there was a tacit understanding that not everyone who is black is necessarily an interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation. The changes arising from globalisation which coincided with the demise of apartheid seem to have diffused the clarity of interlocution in the Black Theology of liberation school as it was sought before. Another problem is that post 1994 more emphasis has been rather on the notion of prophetic theology whose relationship with the liberation paradigm is becoming equally unclear. This article will trace the debate on the interlocution and highlights the differences between prophetic theology and Black Theology of liberation in order to assert the interlocution of Black Theology of liberation with the voiceless in the 21 st century.","author":[{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Vellem","given":"Vuyani","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""}],"container-title":"Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae","id":"ITEM-1","issued":{"date-parts":[["2012"]]},"page":"1-9","title":"Interlocution and Black Theology of liberation in the 21st century: A reflection","type":"article-journal","volume":"38"},"uris":["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=05a6973b-47a7-42dc-8e12-a409abab3b95"]}],"mendeley":{"formattedCitation":"Vuyani Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection," Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 38 (2012

middle class. The political drive for Affirmative Action primarily inspires this, and the influence critical solidarity with the government has had on the consciousness and praxis of BTL.[39] But, how does Vellem constitute the correct interlocutor for BTL? Firstly, he showcases that representation is a complex and contentious task. One possibility he utters is that "the interlocutor is lost in a heteronomous state".[40] Second, the interlocutor is represented and constituted as our "own portraits" who believe, cherish, and desire the same as ourselves.[41] Unfortunately, Vellem ends his article on an anti-climax, without a clear constitution of interlocution in democratic South Africa. His final point is this:

> By its very nature, Black Theology of liberation expanded the contours of the Christian faith and sought other sources for the liberation of the poor outside the confines of orthodox Christian tools. So, interlocution is one of them![42]

It seems to me that Vellem's BTL project, even as he moves towards decoloniality and beyond BTL, is confined to the search for interlocution. This pursuit for the interlocutors may indeed be(come) BTL's paramount and singular task in the post-apartheid context. This is quite clear in Vellem's later constriction of a BTL of decoloniality.

In a 2018 article, '*The Spiritual Dimension of Embracing the Cross*', Vellem articulates the complexity of identifying interlocution for BTL in the praxis of human life. He articulates that the preferential interlocutor will exist within the space of ekassie (the township). However, the identity of possible interlocution in the space of ekassie is found in paradox and fragmentation. On the one hand, a consciousness of agency and the human possibility of creating improvement is present. On the other hand, a consciousness that understands ekassie as detrimental hell.[43] He correlates ekassie with the cross to make his point:

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39 Ibid., 4.

40 Ibid., 6.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 9.

43 Vuyani S. Vellem, "The Spiritual Dimension of Embracing the Cross". *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 2 (2018):518.

> Township life is truly ambivalent; it is a paradox. It is like the cross: unutterably ugly and cruel, an instrument of the Roman Empire used to condemn Jesus, but with something, paradoxically, good coming out of it in our Christian faith. Ekassie analogically exhibits the same features. Nothing positive is imaginable about the incubation and birth of townships in our history of spatial racism and cheap labour in South Africa. Yet, out of the struggle for life, we can discern some excellent and powerful lessons.[44]

Vellem correctly interprets the context of his interlocution as "a struggle for life".[45] This is the essence of the (post)colonial epistemology. However, within this search for interlocution, Vellem seemingly deconstructs all other spaces of struggle, even if these spaces are occupied by people from the context of his interlocution. After all, the struggle for life certainly has the possibility of victory and shifting the struggle to other spaces. On this point, all people who have gained participation in the larger global capitalist society must be brought under suspicion – and is done so by Vellem:

> I wonder if there is anything moral or ethical about capitalism or neoliberal capitalism. […] [The preferential option for the poor] means that the victims of colonization and apartheid become in charge of the *terms* of economics, not just the critique of the *content* of economic justice. The preferential option for the poor implies knowledge derived and opened through the struggles of the victims to alternative existential spaces.[46]

Similarly, Vellem maintains that the political leadership in democratic South Africa is, in essence, powerless (and victims) against the moneyed power in the hands of the white "enclave economy" of the past.[47] Not only

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44 Ibid., 519.

45 Ibid., 530.

46 Vellem and Laubscher, "Interview with Vuyani S. Vellem.", 10,12, [Original italics].

47 Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection."in the methodological debates that were associated with who the interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation was, there was a tacit understanding that not everyone who is black is necessarily an interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation. The changes arising from globalisation which coincided with the demise of apartheid seem to have diffused the clarity of interlocution in the Black Theology of liberation school as it was sought before. Another problem is that post 1994 more emphasis has been rather on

is Vellem's decolonial project a search for adequate interlocution, but also the maintenance of this interlocution by the deconstruction of the societal make-up, to infinitum. Ironically, such a deconstruction maintains the interlocution of BTL within a confined and manageable identity – although such an identity is outside of reach.

This brings me to the third concern – Vellem's choice on understanding identity. As I have showcased, the search for interlocution is complex but has been made manageable by confining identity. Here is where Vellem deviates from the (post)colonial to the most considerable extent. Vellem choice is explicitly located in the colonial concept of identity and, in the South African context, apartheid. The point is straightforward; identity is located in race. Vellem cannot move beyond the polarities and dualities of the colonial theory of race.[48] This is understandable given that the deconstructive project of Vellem's decoloniality is fundamentally based on the deconstruction of the apartheid past – as it is with BTL. However, my concern is that this decolonial project is inconsistent with (post)colonial thought and undermines the newness it tries to bring to the fore by re-articulating and implicitly underscoring the essence of the colonial project.

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the notion of prophetic theology whose relationship with the liberation paradigm is becoming equally unclear. This article will trace the debate on the interlocution and highlights the differences between prophetic theology and Black Theology of liberation in order to assert the interlocution of Black Theology of liberation with the voiceless in the 21 st century.","author":[{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Vellem","given":"Vuyan i","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""}],"container-title":"Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae","id":"ITEM-1","issued":{"date-parts":[["2012"]]},"page":"1-9","title":"Interlocution and Black Theology of liberation in the 21st century: A reflection","type":"article-journal","volume":"38"},"uris":["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=05a6973b-47a7-42dc-8e12-a409abab3b95"]}],"mendeley":{"formattedCitation":"Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection.","plainTextFormattedCitation":"Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection.","previouslyFormattedCitation":"Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: A Reflection.""},"properties":{"noteIndex":47},"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}, 8.

48 See Vellem and Laubscher, "Interview with Vuyani S. Vellem.", 8. Herein he clarifies that blackness, whiteness and the superiority of whiteness as pigmentocracy are colonial products. Vellem's deconstruction of this pigmentocracy and the identity of interlocution are intertwined within this same framework.

3.2. Chris Vorster: A Moderate Decolonisation

Nico Vorster has contemplated decolonial thought for theology since 2018. Although the number of works is limited, he has located himself with a unique perspective on the matter of decoloniality. Two aspects are of importance. Firstly, he champions a moderate decolonial stance. Secondly, he proposes a reciprocal dialogue between decolonial thought and Reformed Theology.

Regarding the first, Vorster rejects militant decolonisation (as per Frantz Fanon) to propose a moderate decolonial stance. Stated differently, he rejects decolonisation as a new universal identity abetted by the destruction of the colonial past (both in physical and mental forms) through violent revolution. [49]He frames his proposal of a moderate decolonial stance as follows:

> The moderate approach, in contrast [to the militant approach], seeks to generate cross-cultural dialogue and construct a new African identity by appropriating what is valuable from Western thought and rejecting that which is not relevant to the African experience.[50]

Three aspects of Vorster's moderate decolonisation must be considered: identity conception, African epistemological, and socio-political decolonisation. Regarding identity conception, Vorster is concerned by the racialised identity conception underlying much of the decolonial discourse.[51] He showcases that the insistence on framing identity in black and white polarities underscores rather than dismantles the colonial past and the inferiority of black bodies. Furthermore, his proposal for a moderate decolonial stance would "stay clear of racial abuse" towards a search for the well-being of the whole intertwined community.[52] In this instance, Vorster explicitly and adequately moves away from the colonial conception of identity but is yet to conclude fragmentation and hybridity

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49 Nico Vorster, "Reformed Theology and 'Decolonised' Identity. Finding a Grammar for Peaceful Coexistence," *HTS Theological Studies,* 74, no. 4 (2018): 5.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 5–6.

52 Ibid., 6.

of identity, which in essence transcends the colonial past and the polarising racial discourse.

Contemplating African epistemology, Vorster showcases in a similar stance to my proposal of a (post)colonial centre the importance of an African perspective as interlocutor in the interpretation and conceptualisation of human existence with the caveat that it "promote dialogue between cultures and […] enrich collaboration between knowledge systems".[53]

It is with regards to the socio-political that Vorster is most critical about the militant possibilities of decolonisation. He argues twofold. Firstly, that socio-political decolonisation promotes a socialist society *vis-à-vis* capitalism as neo-colonialism. And secondly, that such a society must be brought to fruition at all costs, including through violent revolution (using the insights of Frantz Fanon).[54] He rejects such a militant stance which he believes showcased in the recent student movements. "Groups that see violence as a means to an end are de facto awarding their own views an ultimate status."[55] Two comments suffice. Firstly, my reading of (post) colonial theory excludes Fanon's violence on the grounds of ignoring it. I am thus unconvinced that any (post)colonial theorist has taken Fanon's claims to violence seriously. In the spirit of (post)colonisation, violent means to overcoming colonisation is not promoted. Secondly, I am unconvinced that the student movements are violent on the grounds of following Fanon. Instead, the violence portrayed is linked not to a sophisticated means to an end but human tendencies and nature towards violence. The (post)colonial creativity, as I understand it, is more nuanced and complex in the struggle for newness entering the world through the decolonisation of the mind than mere violence, incorporating complex methods and mechanics to transcend a colonial consciousness.

This brings me to Vorster's second project, and he is unique in this endeavour (at least as an explicit conversation); a reciprocal dialogue between decolonial thought and Reformed Theology. He proposes three avenues in which decolonial thought could aid Reformed Theology; sin as

53 Ibid., 7.

54 Ibid., 8.

55 Ibid.

an ideology through colonial structures and thought, restoration of human dignity for the oppressed, and a high value on indigenisation.[56] When Vorster speaks of Reformed Theology, he explicitly locates it in the early reformation under John Calvin's thought. There is a problem, however, and it is that Black Theology of Liberation and its later incorporation of African theologies have already affirmed these three points. Not to mention that Black theologians have often claimed to be the true bearers of Calvinism.[57]

Vorster criticises decolonial thought on four points from a "Classical Reformed" position: reader-oriented hermeneutics, violent revolution, dismissal of western thought, and returning to pre-colonial thought.[58] Except for the first point, where Vorster claims Reformed hermeneutics to be centred in the "authentic message of the text"[59], all the other points could be critiqued based on an uncomprehensive understanding of the (post)colonial discourse. Violent revolution is rejected on the grounds of omission. In the (post)colonial centre, western thought is not dismissed but incorporated as one of the legitimate centres of thought. And a return to pre-colonial thought is seen as impossible.

Overall, Vorster's project is exciting and vital but has some shortcomings in comprehensive contemplation.

3.3. Teddy Sakupapa: Revealing Decolonial Insights

To my mind, Teddy Sakupapa's decolonial project shows the most profound potential for the future endeavour of (post)colonial theology. The most outstanding contribution of his decolonial project lies in revealing decolonial insights within the diverse theological interlocutors he converses

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56 Nico Vorster, "African Decolonization and Reformed Theology," in Matthew Kaemingk (ed.), *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World* (Grand: Baker Academic, 2021), 47–59.

57 In my contemplation on Allan Boesak, the first two points are prominent. See W. Wessels, "Contemplating Allan Boesak's Fascination with Preaching 'Truth to Power'". *Acta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (2017):188-206. Already in the early work of Maluleke, the point of indigenisation comes to the fore. See Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in the New World Order A Time to Drink from Our Own Wells," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 96 (1996):3-19.

58 Vorster, "African Decolonization and Reformed Theology."

59 Ibid.

with. Three interlocutors suffice for this article: African theology, (Western) Trinitarian thought, and African culture.[60]

Regarding African theology, Sakupapa showcases the "decolonising content" which finds itself within African theology.[61] Using the insights of John Mbiti, he shows decolonial insights as located in Mbiti's distinction between the gospel itself and the socio-cultural embodiment of the gospel.[62] In other words, African Traditional Religion is appraised as an essential predecessor of African Christianity. From Jesse Mugambi, Sakupapa showcases the decolonial move, which calls for "re-mythologisation".[63] This re-mythologisation is twofold and constructed for the needs and lived experience of the African person. Firstly, an epistemology of theologisation from an African centred approach. Secondly, an African re-construction (through new and reinterpreted myths) of theology. Stated differently, Mugambi's approach legitimises the African centre for theological thought. In conversation with Mercy Oduyoye, Sakupapa demonstrates inclusivity of decolonial insights.[64] In the case of Oduyoye, it is both the critique of the exclusion and marginalisation of women in African thought and the conceptualisation that the koinonia idea of the church works against such tendencies. From Kwame Bediako, Sakupapa conceptualises a reinterpretation of the agency of Africans concerning Christianity.[65] Two points; firstly, Christianity was transmitted, translated, and grew in Africa through the agency of Africans and not western mission. Secondly, Bediako's project is the intellectual task of African theology, and not merely religious – as it was thus far. From a decolonial position, the first decolonises the past, while the second decolonises future theological endeavours.

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60 Looking at Sakupapa's interlocutors, he showcases a (post)colonial centre where many centres of thought are explored.

61 Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa, "The Decolonising Content of African Theology and the Decolonisation of African Theology: Reflections on a Decolonial Future for African Theology," *Missionalia* 46, no. 3 (2018):406–24. It is interesting to note that Sakupapa places concerns and alternative voices regarding each scholar's work on the table. He thus works quite thoroughly with the complexities of each scholar's contribution.

62 Ibid., 410–412.

63 Ibid., 412–413.

64 Ibid., 413–414.

65 Ibid., 414–415.

In conclusion, Sakupapa proposes four points for the project of decolonisation from African theology: an epistemological interruption of Western-centric theology;[66] decolonial critique of theological decolonisation;[67] engagement with contemporary African Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular;[68] and the necessity to hold in creative tension contextualisation and catholicity.[69]

This brings me to Sakupapa's interlocution with Trinitarian theology. In an article co-authored with Ernst Conradie, Conradie and Sakupapa ask about the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity *vis-à-vis* the decolonial turn.[70] Notwithstanding the colonial impulses in historical usage of the Trinitarian doctrine and African theological critique, which they extensively contemplate,[71] for this discussion, two points of decolonial construction of the Trinity suffice. The Trinitarian identity and decolonial insights within a rereading of salvation history. With regards to the first, Conradie and Sakupapa correctly proposes that the identity of God in relation to his people brings about novel revelation:

> [T]his is one of the core characteristics of the engagement with God's identity and character throughout the Jewish-Christian tradition. […] In each case [of God's engagement] there is some continuity with a more traditional understanding of God, but the emphasis is on a surprisingly novel understanding of God's identity and character.[72]

This "novel" creativity and revelation in the identity of God relates strongly to the proposal I have made of a (post)colonial identity, as pertaining not only to human existence but to Godself.

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66 Ibid., 418.

67 Ibid., 419.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 420.

70 Ernst M Conradie and Teddy C Sakupapa, "'Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity' or 'The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity'?," *Journal of Theology for Southern African* 161 (July 2018):37–53.

71 Ibid., 37–50.

72 Ibid., 52–53.

In their construction in engaging anew with salvation history as pertaining in the Biblical narrative, Conradie and Sakupapa construct the spirit, cross and father in decolonial terms. The spirit is more conducive to "social transformation than to legitimise the status quo".[73] The cross as an imperial (and colonial symbol) has been employed against such tendencies.[74] And, the idea of God as "our father" stands in resistance to God as a symbol of imperial power, such as King or Emperor.[75] This rereading can adequately be seen as the (post)colonial epistemology which decolonises the mind.

Lastly, in Sakupapa's interlocution with African culture, he contemplates the idea of ubuntu for the praxis of the church.[76] He goes to great lengths to showcase, both for the internal cohesion of the church and its service in the world, inclusivity of "hospitality, fellowship and participation […] sharing, interdependence and solidarity".[77] He transcends ubuntu ideas in African culture that might be exclusivist and explicitly claims that "both the oppressor and the oppressed are created in the image of God".

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have endeavoured a conversation with (post)colonial theology in South Africa. From the above, I perceive three important concluding remarks. Firstly, theology which explicitly positions itself as influenced by the decolonial turn are diverse in their expressions. This diversity, on the one hand, is both to be expected and beneficial to the ongoing construction of decolonial theology. However, the divergences in decolonial thought are also concerning. The incorporation of decolonial and postcolonial themes to underscore and justify theological movement questions the legitimacy of whether the decolonial turn has brought anything new to the theological table.

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73 Ibid., 51.

74 Ibid., 52.

75 Ibid.

76 Teddy C Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu," *Scriptura* 117, no. 1 (2018):1–15.

77 Ibid., 9–12.

Secondly, the construction a conscious (post)colonial theology is lacking. The current trends are located in deconstruction of the colonial consciousness and a description of implicit decolonial theologies of the past. There is, therefore, a lacuna and opportunity for theological thought which are both explicitly (post)colonial and moves towards constructing other ways of theologising in the South African context.

Thirdly, and most concerning, is the audacious acceptance of colonial identities within the decolonial conversation. The (post)colonial terms and conditions of searching for the wellbeing of the whole people of God needs an adequate and comprehensive transcendence of the colonial identity politics which are pervasive in our current context.

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