The shifting identity of a first-year class in Practical Theology: Some tentative reflections on decolonization

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Abstract

I started 2020 with 130 first-year students enrolled for Practical Theology and Missiology at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The students represent twenty different denominations, 75 percent of the students are black, coloured, and Indian (BCI) and 25 percent are white. Ten years ago, the same first-year class consisted of thirty students, of whom 95 percent were white and almost all were part of the Reformed tradition. The shifting identity of the class over a decade inevitably led me to reflect deeply on what I teach them (curriculum) and how I facilitate the learning process (pedagogy). I also had to pay close attention to decolonization and contextualization because of the #feesmustfall-movement. The basic research question of this contribution is therefore: How does one reflect on the shifting identity of a first-year class and how does one decolonize a first-year module in Practical Theology and Missiology in South Africa? In order to answer the research question, the article takes the following steps: first, aspects of the changed context and shifting identity will be discussed and second, attention will be given to what is meant by decolonization, with specific reference to the curriculum. Third, the focus will be on a proposed curriculum that uses a theo-dramatic approach in conversation with the movie *Son of Man*. Fourth, I reflect on the learning process (pedagogy) and how it also contributed to a shift in my own identity.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, I visited an art exhibition at the Sasol Art Museum of Stellenbosch University, South Africa, where the curator showed us, a video titled "The Invisible Gorilla". In the video, there are six people: three men wearing black shirts and three women wearing white shirts. They are throwing a ball to one another. The curator asks us to count how many times the ball is thrown back and forth between the players in

white. At one stage, a gorilla walks into the middle of the group, looks at the camera, pats his chest, and leaves again after being on screen for nine seconds. Furthermore, the curtains change colour and one of the women disappears from the screen along with the gorilla. After the curator stopped the video, he asked us: Who saw the gorilla, the curtains changing and that one of the woman disappeared? More than half of the group of thirty did not see any of the three things happened, me included. He then shows the video again and amazingly, there were all three of these things in full glory.

This same experiment was done at Harvard University a few years ago and it was also found that half of the people who watched the video were correct in counting the number of times the ball was thrown but missed the other three completely. It was as if these three things were invisible. What this experiment teaches is that firstly, we miss a lot of things going on around us while concentrating on one thing, and secondly, we have no idea that we are missing out so much. To everyone's surprise, it has become one of the most famous experiments in psychology, and it is used by many people, from teachers and pastors to leaders in the corporate world and film directors (cf. Marois 2010). They all use it to explain what we see and do not see and to make us aware of how our intuitive views about our own thinking and preconceived ideas can be completely wrong. The video[1] is based on the book of Chabris and Simons (2010), *The Invisible Gorilla: And other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us*.

I like to use this video as an analogy of what often happens in curriculum development. Many hours of preparation go into finding the right learning content (watching the ball), with little to no attention to the changing context (the curtains' colour changing), the so-called gorilla in the room (decolonization) and the disappearance of the student (attention to pedagogy and assessment).

2. The changing context and shift of identities

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1   To watch the video, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo&ab_channel=DanielSimons

Africa. The students represent twenty different denominations, 75 percent of the students are black, coloured, and Indian (BCI) and 25 percent are white. Ten years ago, the same first-year class consisted of thirty students, of whom 95 percent were white and almost all were part of the Reformed tradition. The shifting identity of the class over a decade, and also shifts in my own identity as lecturer, inevitably led me to reflect deeply on what I teach them (curriculum) and how I facilitate the learning process (pedagogy).

Things have changed dramatically over the past decade in the field of higher education and at least three major factors have had an impact on identity politics during this time. The first is the so-called commodification of higher education related to the packaging of knowledge and its sale on global and local markets (Le Grange 2009). The commodification of higher education is further related to the way in which even students are often treated as commodities and data that are swallowed up and spit out as potential jobseekers, and where higher education is often reduced to a form of coaching for the job market (Giroux 2014).

The second factor relates to the case that universities are increasingly driven by a so-called knowledge economy that experiences pressure from two sides. On the one hand, there is the inner pressure associated with epistemological challenges related to the shift from Mode 1 knowledge that refers to pure, disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-driven, peer reviewed, and exclusively university-based knowledge to Mode 2 knowledge that is application-based, problem-based, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, entrepreneurial, and network-embedded knowledge (Gibbons et al 1994). On the other hand, there is external pressure related to the socio-economic burden for change in terms of patterns of participation, who gain access to education and the broadening of admission (Watson 2003). These influences are also evident from policies such as *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education 1997).

The third factor is that universities, specifically in African countries, face the challenge of a lack of adequate financial resources, unresolved social crises, nepotism, political interference, and environmental degradation. Furthermore, it is also the case that most students in Africa grow up with

indigenous ways of knowing, which creates all sorts of epistemological challenges for them when they come to university and are confronted with Western epistemologies. By Western epistemologies I understand the process in which all of the histories, experiences, cultural products, and resources, ended up in one global cultural order revolving around Western and European hegemony. At the same time, when Westernized graduates and students enter traditional African communities, they in turn experience the tension of being epistemologically at a distance from these communities (Costandius and Bitzer 2015:16).

The combination of the three changes forms the backdrop for the #FeesMustFall movement and arguably the most important challenge higher education faced since the dawn of democracy, which obviously had a huge impact on identity formation among students and lecturers. This movement originated on the campus of the University of Cape Town in early 2015 and was initially known as the #RhodesMustFall movement, which demanded that the statue of Cecil John Rhodes be removed from campus. The latter was related to the disappointment with the colonial culture and colonial figures in higher education institutions. As the movement gained momentum, it was demanded that universities be decolonized, and the students later also insisted that the fees for tuition and student debt be written off, through which the ideal of free higher education was pursued. Badat (2016:10) names a myriad of problems in higher education that led to #FeesMustFall:

> … debt burdens, high drop-out rates, poor throughput rates, inadequate facilities and accommodation, largely unreconstructed epistemologies and ontologies, questionable quality of learning and teaching to ensure meaningful opportunities and success and alienating and disempowering academic and institutional cultures that are products of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.

As part of the #FeesMustFall movement, some other issues also came to the fore. In this regard it is specifically racism that played an enormous role. The structures of historically entrenched power can unfortunately not be separated from racism, as it deals with aspects such as land ownership and the role of public places. In general, white privileged lecturers and students find the experience of campus culture at historically white universities

as natural and find themselves at home within that culture. Previously disadvantaged students and lecturers often do not find themselves at home within this culture at all and find it alienating, discomforting, exclusionary, and disempowering (Biscombe et al. 2017).

In research conducted by Jawitz (2018:950) at the University of Cape Town, it was revealed that white male academic staff honestly wrestled with the privileges and limitations of their white identity. He found that many of them distanced themselves from the 'white' stereotyping by remaining silent about injustice and by not interfering in aspects related to race as a result of feelings of guilt. This approach of selective silence can, of course, easily lead to the continuation of dominant white discourses and the ideal of higher education to contribute to democratic citizenship, social justice, and social and economic development may be jeopardized. This brings us to the "gorilla on the stage".

3. Decolonizing the curriculum

From the previous section it is clear that the decolonization of the curriculum has become a matter of great urgency. One can approach decolonization from different angles. I was privileged to be part of a group of seven researchers from five different faculties who undertook empirical research among Stellenbosch students and lecturers during 2017–2018 on the #FeesMustFall movement and the decolonization of the curriculum (Costandius et al. 2018). We used various theoretical perspectives, which included affective theory, decolonization, and social justice. Concerning decolonization, we worked with the following concepts:

African centrality relates to the fact that Europe and the West are considered the centre of the world within colonial education. If one sees education as a way to develop self-knowledge, it should start at the local level and from there circle outwards to discover more knowledge of people in the wider world. Therefore, Africa and curricula from Africa should be at the centre and then not merely as an appendix of the canon of the West and Europe. Where the truth is attributed only to the Western ways of acquiring knowledge, it must be decentralized, and it is essential that the focus should fall on Africa and move towards the decolonization of the attainment of knowledge (Mbembe 2016; Wa Thiong'o 1986).

In terms of *knowledge production*, the binary contrast of the enlightened and modern West over and against the traditional and primitive Africa is still noticeable in many academic discourses and even in the reports of journalists. Therefore, we must be vigilant for the invisible dynamics of colonialism, as it influences learning processes, especially in the way colonial perspectives are presented as true knowledge developed through research, which in the process justifies and maintains the unjust colonial structures. We must not forget that universities in South Africa developed from the colonial project and that research was specifically aimed at serving the colonial agenda. In our research, therefore, we must deliberately deconstruct the historical development of the disciplines in academia, in the form of their archives, but at the same time does not lose sight of the fact that knowledge systems cannot be isolated from global systems. It is therefore about the decentring of Western knowledge systems and attempts to decolonize curricula to give indigenous African knowledge systems a valid and equal place among the knowledge systems in the world. The classrooms of universities and the way in which knowledge is transferred need to be decolonized, because in Africa we need knowledge that addresses our own challenges and needs (Le Grange 2009; Luckett 2016).

Settler perspectives relates to a way of speaking that allows one to illuminate a certain perspective. Although people generally do not like to talk about a 'native' or a 'settler,' especially if we are striving for a united South African identity, this terminology helps one to talk about decolonization from a certain perspective, namely the settler perspective. What is meant by this is that it is done from the point of view of white South Africans. According to Tuck and Yang (2012), it is the case that decolonization from a settler perspective unsettles and implicates us all and it is often asked in debates that white people should not speak on behalf of the colonized. It is a given that white South Africans cannot renounce their colonial heritage, but it is still possible, if they are willing, to participate with humility and caution in the recognition and dismantling of colonial structures. Part of this work is to then expose the underlying settler perspectives seriously. According to Tuck and Yang (2012:9), settler perspectives include aspects such as the desire to remove the 'native' and anxiety and a movement towards innocence. In South Africa, this settler anxiety finds expression as white guilt experienced by white lecturers and students. According to

Leibowitz (2016:3), "decolonizing the curriculum cannot happen outside of the pursuit of social justice. It cannot happen outside of a view that sees power and privilege as of central importance."

Student experiences refers to students' experiences and perceptions of higher education. Research has shown that BCI students often experience contradictions between the linguistic and cultural demands placed on them and the policies that grant them admission to higher education institutions. In this regard, it is important to provide the right information and advice to first-generation students. Unfortunately, the lack of information and advice often leads to academic exclusion and many of these students fail (Luckett 2016). Subreenduth (2012) believes that the importance of student-centred teaching and learning should be expanded if we are serious about student-centeredness, that we should see the student protests as a call for help and that it is the responsibility of academics to help with this process. Due to the nature of the matter, it is important that access to higher education must increase, and South Africa will have to invest more in higher education institutions and universities. Concerning the point of inclusion, it is important to pay attention to cultural access for BCI lecturers and students where they can experience a sense of belonging in the spaces of teaching and learning (Mbembe 2016).

In response to the foregoing and with a view to the possible redesign of the curriculum of Practical Theology and Missiology 112, I have taken my starting point from the work of Braidotti (2013). She is of the opinion that we should follow a bottom-up approach, where the initiative should come from the lecturers instead of from management. We must realize that we as lecturers are inherently part of the problems around us and that we should not idealize philosophical meta-discourses. We need to take a more pragmatic approach and through humble experimentation work towards self-transformation. The latter should include aspects such as body, mind, curriculum, and classroom. The decolonization of spaces relates to things such as architecture, photographs, artifacts, symbols, buildings, and statutes, and some of the approaches can be replacement or reinterpretation. This situation requires vulnerability, honesty, courage, awareness, the willingness to engage and take ownership of the processes, and a lot of creativity (Costandius et al 2018:84).

4. Curriculum changes

In view of all the above I have made a deliberate decision to start with the first two aspects above, which are both related to the decentralization of the Western knowledge system in developing a new curriculum. I decided to work with an African perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and began using the film *Son of Man* a few years ago to create a specific frame of reference. It is the first film in the Jesus film genre to have an entirely black cast, including the leading role of a black Jesus (Mokoena 2017).

4.1 The film *Son of Man*

Son of Man places the story of Jesus in the contemporary South African context, with Jesus as a black person who speaks isiXhosa and embraces isiXhosa tradition and culture. *Son of Man* is a transcultural story of Jesus that connects the Gospel story with the everyday experience of black people in South Africa. *Son of Man* changes the idea that the image of Jesus can only be portrayed as Western or Middle Eastern. There is no doubt that the film uses the ideology of black consciousness and the practice of black theology artistically and creatively. Chattaway (2016) explains that in adapting the story for the silver screen, the director of the film, Mark Dornford-May, was not interested in studying other retellings of Jesus' story. Instead, he was fascinated by the stories of political activist Steve Biko. Therefore, he made Biko a Christ figure and built the story around three themes: ideology, non-violence, and disappearance and death.

What follows are brief notes on each of the three elements mentioned, making use of the insights of Mokoena (2017:1–6). In terms of *ideology*, one can assume that if you imagine a person such as Biko as a Christ figure, he will not be interested in personal morality in the first place, but more in institutional morality. During the apartheid years, a message of self-condemnation was preached to black Christians, which resulted in black people pointing the finger at themselves rather than at the oppressive system of apartheid. The fact that so many black people are landless, unemployed, poor, and without proper housing is not due to personal sin, but because of the structural sin of apartheid. The Jesus in *Son of Man* (2006) was very adamant about this when he preached to a small group of followers in a house:

> We are too busy with moral trivialities, as if they are the most important things. If you constantly find fault with yourself, you will lose the struggle against real sin. All authority is not divinely instituted. If you follow me, we will have peace.

Many of the problems in the townships are not the work of black people, but of white people who were economically greedy and who deprived people of their land, which led to institutional poverty. One must therefore understand it as a history of colonialism and the imperialist misrepresentation that gave rise to many of Africa's current problems. In the words of the Jesus in *Son of Man*:

> When those with imperial histories pretend to forget them and blame Africans' problems on tribalism and corruption while building themselves new economic empires, I say we have been lied to. Evil did not fall.

Africa's resources have been looted in immensity and people have been expropriated from their land by European forces. That is why the Jesus of *Son of Man* speaks in two places in the film about the importance of land. In fact, the film begins with Jesus pushing Satan away and declaring "This is my world". Overpopulation, unemployment, and poverty in Africa are all the consequences of colonialism.

The next element is related to *non-violence* and goes back to the initial efforts of the African National Congress, which tried in a non-violent way to acquire land since 1912. Biko (1978:151) describes how the black consciousness movement was committed from the beginning to achieve their goals in a non-violent way and planned to use a peaceful approach to the oppressive system with each of their programs. They worked with the belief that the white person would eventually listen to the black voice, and that the use of force will hopefully not be necessary. The purpose of the black consciousness movement was to liberate the black person from a sense of inferiority, to learn self-pride, to be economically independent, and to decide on their own destiny for themselves. More (2004:213) speaks of a strategy that consisted of two phases, namely on the one hand the psychological liberation and on the other hand the physical and economic liberation. With this approach, the black consciousness movement gained considerable international support.

In the film *Son of Man*, we also find a Jesus who advocates non-violence. For example, we see how he asks his disciples to hand over their weapons, as they did not need weapons for their battle. Jesus emphasizes that they must prove to the people who dominate them that they will deal with poverty, epidemics, and corruption in a non-violent way. The militant forces in *Son of Man* did their job by instilling fear and using intimidation to suppress the liberation initiatives of the people. Jesus is eventually arrested and taken to a place of seclusion, where he is tortured, but he remains committed to the cause of social justice until his death.

The last element concerns *disappearance and death*, which, according to Zwick (2011), goes back to the white terror regime, where they used to kill anti-apartheid activists and got rid of their bodies in secret. During the time of apartheid, many people 'disappeared', of which people only became aware during the sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Jesus of *Son of Man* identifies with the story of Biko, who also disappeared, was tortured and eventually died. The filmmaker, Mark Donford-May, states that the people familiar with the circumstances of Biko's death will know that the Jesus of *Son of Man* was carried to his grave from a *bakkie*[2] similar to the one with which Biko was transported before his death.

In the film, Jesus is interrogated and tortured, after which he is executed with a pistol and buried in a shallow grave. Mary is later informed of Jesus' death and the place where he was buried. However, Mary had the body of Jesus exhumed and placed on a cross so that the whole community could see him. The purpose of this was to make known to the community what happened to Jesus when he disappeared. Once again, it reminds one of Biko's death, where it was alleged that he died of a hunger strike, while in fact he was transported naked in the back of a police force *bakkie* over one thousand kilometres. Biko's death indeed captured the imagination of the international community and what followed was increasing pressure on the South African government to abandon this way of police detention and an international investigation into his death. Christ in the figure of Biko has become a symbol of courage and bravery. He stood for social justice and paid for it with his life. In the light of the film, Biko's death should not

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2   An Afrikaans word meaning open truck or pick-up.

be seen as a defeat, but as a victory, as he did not give in to intimidation. In this way, the death of Jesus in *Son of Man* gave new energy and courage to Mary and Jesus' followers, so much so that they turned into protests around the body of Jesus and ended up in direct confrontation with the military forces. With this scene, the film also highlights the prominent role that women played in the struggle for liberation, which is so often overlooked.

4.2 A theo-dramatic approach

In connection with the three aspects related to the change of the curriculum, I also decided to structure the module differently in order to justify the curriculum changes. For this purpose, I sought some guidance from aesthetics and found theo-drama an interesting conversation partner. The origin of this approach can be traced back to the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, as developed in his five-volume work *Theo-drama* (1988–1998). Other works also had an influence, such as *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-prophetic Ecclesiology* (Healy 2000) and the protest play titled *Woza Albert!*, which was published in 1981 by Percy Mtwa and Mbogeni Ngema, with the help and creative input from renowned playwright and political activist Barney Simon (Havenga 2019). What made this protest play so striking was the fact that it retold the Christ story, as contained in the Gospels, in the context of apartheid, with Jesus, or *Morena* (as he is called in Sesotho), unexpectedly arriving at the Passport Office in Albert Street, Johannesburg, to preach the Good News to those suffering under the apartheid regime. One also sees clear parallels in this play with the film *Son of Man*.

The choice for a dramatological approach is related to the need that exists in practical theology to supplement action-communicative models from the social sciences with models that are developed in the humanities and arts. The fruitfulness of this type of dialogue between theology and the humanities has begun to gain momentum in recent decades with the emergence of narrative as an important category in theology and ethics. The metaphorical complex of drama enjoys and retains the benefits of narratology. Drama is a 'storied' by nature with an intriguing plot that unfolds and emphasizes the unity of action over time. But dramas also go further by placing the role of action in the foreground through dramatic realization. In other words, dramas are not only read, but also performed.

Applied to the teaching of practical theology, lecturers and students are part of an ongoing dramatic performance of the gospel with different role players on the stage.

In my own approach to practical theology, I use the basic categories of drama to teach and reflect on four themes. In the course Introduction to Practical Theology and Missiology 112, I use the stage to explain something of the local, national, and international context (culture) in which we theologize. As the *script*, we look at discipleship as it is discussed especially in the New Testament and we dwell on various components of what it means to be followers of Christ. We look at the actions and lives of the main actor, Jesus Christ, in search of pointers for the development of the plot. In the *plot*, we focus on various acts that result from discipleship, including celebration, proclamation, koinonia, teaching, care, and service. It helps us understand the basic structure of the drama to which we are all invited to participate. In the last part we look at the different *roles of the actors* and at character development based on different gifts to find out what role we ourselves can and should play in the drama (Nell 2020).

5. A new pedagogy

Looking for a new pedagogy that considers the South African realities discussed above, it becomes clear that the appropriate way to work is with a social justice perspective and therefore ultimately with a pedagogy of discomfort.[3] The shift to a new pedagogy also causes a shift in the identity of the lecturer as pedagogue causing discomfort in oneself. That is the case because the purpose of social justice education is to disrupt presuppositions and favourite starting points that are often used in pedagogy (Berlak 2004). If one listens to the traumatic stories of some of the BCI students and the background from which some of them come, it is inevitable that I as a lecturer will experience discomfort. I have also learned from experience that when teaching results in some form of crisis in a student and is done

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3   As worded by Zembylas: "There is an important distinction that needs to be made upfront between 'discomfort' on the one hand, and 'pain and suffering' on the other. Discomfort is linked to one's 'comfort zones,' the feeling of uneasiness that is disturbing someone's comfort. Pain and suffering are not the same feelings as discomfort; they are much stronger, and they are linked to injury or harm" (2015:173).

with care, the potential for transformation exists. I have this experience of discomfort every time the white students are confronted with a black Jesus. Felman writes:

> If teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught … I therefore think that my job as a teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without "driving the students crazy," without compromising the students' bounds (1992:58).

According to Jansen (2009), what is important when teaching with a social justice perspective is to ensure that a framework for "classroom safety" must be created. Although there is no clarity on what is meant by these spaces for classroom safety, there is still a tension here that deserves our attention. On the one hand, we are working with the assumption that transformation will not take place without classroom safety. On the other hand, when students expect comfort, the possibility of growth is virtually taken away in advance. In other words, the assumption that classroom space is supposed to be a safe place does not imply that it should be a space without discomfort and stress. Ultimately, it is about a basic respect for students' emotions (2009).

Boler and Zembylas (2003) are of the opinion that there is really no such thing as safe classroom spaces when one considers that privilege and power are always present and at work. Zembylas states: "For example, marginalized students' need for safety (i.e. not being dominated) seems incompatible with the privileged students 'desire to not be challenged; for privileged students, safety may imply not having their values and beliefs questioned" (2015:165). Consequently, there are major challenges in teaching and learning for social justice regarding the role of critical educators in creating classroom spaces where students can engage with their fellow students and lecturers in conversations while acknowledging the unequal power relations. Therefore, safety in this regard cannot be understood as the absence of discomfort, and at the same time, the fact that discomfort is experienced should not be confused with the absence of safety. What is important is that teachers in the classroom should open

learning spaces where students can engage with one another in critical inquiry concerning their beliefs and values.

6. Conclusion

With this contribution I attempted to reflect, in the light of the changing profile of the class composition of a first-year module in Practical Theology and Missiology in terms of demography (BCI students), to what extent it also led to the shift of identities. Using the image of the invisible gorilla, I explained how easily one, when it comes to adapting and changing a curriculum, can focus on just one thing, without being aware of other aspects that go along with it. Therefore, I first started by looking at the changing context and the shift of identities. Secondly, I looked at the decolonizing of the curriculum and identified four factors related to it, namely African centrality, knowledge production, settler perspectives and student experiences. Thirdly, I looked at real curriculum changes and finally also considered a new pedagogy for teaching these changes, all of which contribute in one way or another to the shifts that take place in identity.

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