

Ecumenical reflections on race, racism, and whiteness in the afterlife of apartheid in South Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the contributions made to a 28 April 2022 ecumenical dialogue on race, racism, and whiteness in South Africa. Following a careful analysis of the recordings and transcripts from this dialogue, the article identifies multiple themes regarding race and whiteness that emerged from participants at this event. The article seeks to point out contemporary challenges identified by Christian leaders around race and whiteness to outline potential challenges both in terms of ecclesial actions on anti-racism, but more specifically key research agenda to critically accompany faith communities responding to questions around race, racism, and whiteness. The article concludes by suggesting that there is a clear need to revisit the possible place of churches in responding to the unfinished work of the TRC, to focus specific attention on the intersection of congregational studies and anti-racism, to develop congregational practices that will contribute to the ongoing dismantling of structural racism, and further theological research needed to look into how South African theology was, and continues to be, formed by a colonial and white imagination, and what a faith and theology liberated from its colonial shackles would look like.

Keywords

ecumenism; whiteness; racism; apartheid

Introduction

Questions around race, racism, and anti-racism have been thoroughly woven into the history of South African ecumenism throughout all its iterations, and is evident in several ways, not least in how the very formation of the Christian faith in South Africa is at heart intertwined with a legacy of colonialism. The form that denominational structures took on was deliberately directed through the segregationist politics of the respective colonial and apartheid governments. Moreover, the prominent place of the ecumenical reflection in the struggle against apartheid is remembered in events such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation at Cottesloe (1960), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) meeting at Ottawa (1982), or in the important role that the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Diakonia Council of Churches played in the struggle against apartheid, to name just some very prominent examples. Names of key ecumenical figures like Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naudé, and Frank Chikane, in not merely the history of the church but also in the history of the formation of a democratic South Africa, is a reminder of both the prominent place of the church, and of the fact that often the prophetic response of the church to apartheid was not seen in the actions of local congregations or formal denominational structures, but rather in the work of individual activist-theologians. The prominence of race and racism is also evident in how the history of the ecumenical movement over the past half-century cannot be disentangled from the global ecumenical response to apartheid, particularly in the WCC Program to Combat Racism. Revisiting questions of racism within South African churches as part of our ecumenical engagements should therefore not come as a surprise at all.

On 28 April 2022, the study centre for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, held an ecumenical consultation to reflect on questions of race, racism, and whiteness within churches in South Africa. This article provides context for this consultation and then offers an analysis of the themes that arose during the consultation.¹ These emerging

1 An earlier preliminary report on this consultation was previously published (Van Wyngaard & Van der Riet, 2022). This article draws on this earlier report but significantly expands and revises it.

themes are also informed by earlier faith-based ecumenical reflections on apartheid, race, and racism in South Africa. The final section of the paper outlines an agenda for further research on church responses to persistent racism in South Africa at large and the South African church in particular.

This article cannot claim to present the entire narrative of contemporary church experiences and reflections on racism in South Africa. As will be outlined, it presents but a sliver of church perspectives and reflects on themes that emerged at a particular moment of engagement as church representatives consciously engaged around questions of racism and whiteness. We hope that these themes will allow a point of entry for further engagement and research on how race, racism, and whiteness impact the church on various levels, and for critical engagement with the omissions and silences in this ecumenical conversation where formal church representatives have been centred.

1. Churches engaging on race, racism and whiteness

As indicated in the introduction, South Africa holds a particular place in the ecumenical work around questions of racism. As churches globally are faced with new questions around ongoing racism, whether these relate to migrations or the ongoing exploitation of certain groups of people, the way in which the South African church engages with these questions, almost three decades after the first democratic elections, may provide insights into what should be on our agenda in the coming years. While this is not the first of such conversations (Thesnaar & Hansen, 2020), it adds to the intersection between this history of South African church responses to racism after apartheid, while conscious of the history of broader ecumenical involvement in this conversation.

In preparation for the above-mentioned consultation, an invitation was extended to a broad group of church representatives to reflect on racism and whiteness within and from the perspective of their churches. Individuals were invited to speak either in their official representative capacity or merely to share from their own experiences as members of their denomination. To provide participants with an example of such a reflection, a recently published research paper by Van der Riet and Van Wyngaard (2021) was included in the invitation, in which the development of responses to racism

and apartheid in the Dutch Reformed Church between 1986 and 2019 is explored.

While the invitations were deliberately sent to the entire spectrum of more established as well as newer and more independent churches, participants came largely from the protestant “so-called mainline” (De Gruchy 2014) churches. These included the historically “English speaking” churches (Methodist Church of Southern Africa, United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, Anglican Church of Southern Africa, Baptist Union of Southern Africa) and the historically “Afrikaans-speaking” Reformed churches (Dutch Reformed Church, Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika) as well as the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) and the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). Notable exceptions were the Roman Catholic Church, African Independent Churches, and newer Pentecostal or Charismatic churches. We have little doubt that on this topic, representatives beyond the historic protestant churches that were involved with the South African Council of Churches would provide perspectives that would significantly diversify the themes below.

While those present typically occupied senior positions of leadership in their respective denomination – as bishops, general secretaries, or in some other way directly involved with national or regional leadership – in almost all cases, they indicated that their input is in their personal capacity (even in cases where they were indeed formally asked to represent the church at this consultation). The group was also joined by participants from the 29 April 2022 consultation on Theological Education, and several academic theologians who have worked on the topic.

The one-day consultation consisted of two parts. In the first half, each church representative was allowed to share their perspective on what is transpiring in their denomination on questions of racism or whiteness. Eight speakers spoke on behalf of different denominations. During the second half, the facilitators shared preliminary themes that emerged from presentations, and the group of approximately 30 participants were allowed to reflect further on and co-construct the emerging themes. The entire event was audio-recorded, and participants were aware that their inputs were being recorded for further analysis on emerging themes.

2. Analysis and reporting

The analysis of the presentations and conversations occurred in different layers across a period of time. The first level of analysis happened on the day, as themes were identified by facilitators following the initial presentations, and then presented to the group for discussion and reflection. The second analysis happened in preparation for the reporting for the WCME later in 2022. This was done by revisiting around 5 hours of audio recordings and carefully taking notes of the emerging themes. Thereafter, the recordings were transcribed, and in 2024, the transcribed conversations were also analysed and further themes identified inductively.

The purpose of this analysis is to extend earlier faith-based ecumenical reflections on apartheid, race and racism in South Africa with more recent reflections on the state of church responses to racism and whiteness. Key themes emerging from the contributions are outlined below to sketch an agenda for further research on church responses to persistent racism in South Africa at large and the South African church. In the discussion below, a distinction is made between contributions from speakers during presentations (S) and inputs from participants during round-table discussions (P), where examples of particular perspectives are quoted.

3. Emerging themes

This section aims to outline key themes that emerged during both the church presentations and the round-table discussion on these presentations. Some themes were identified and discussed on the day, while others emerged through the various stages of analysis described above. The discussion was prompted by a prior article (2021, Van der Riet & Van Wyngaard) that explicitly engaged with the language of whiteness and a call for church representatives to frame reflections around racism and whiteness. This guidance clearly directed the discussion in particular directions, yet the themes that emerged from this provide valuable avenues for further exploring how whiteness functions within faith communities.

3.1 A history of Apartheid and segregation

It should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with research on the pervasiveness of racism across many societies, but across the spectrum of

churches present during this event, there is a recognition of how South African churches were formed and distorted by the history of apartheid, and how this continues to impact the present.

One of the Afrikaans Reformed churches shared the reality of the very recent history of removing clauses in support of apartheid theology from its church order, which resulted in renewed painful schisms within this white Afrikaans church, as some insist on retaining an explicitly ethnic and racial ecclesial identity. Here, apartheid is recognised as still being alive in very explicit ways.

Similarly, a predominantly black Reformed church in South Africa indicated how apartheid continues to live in the structuring of the churches, as a *de facto* white and black church.

Racism in South Africa is still a great challenge in the church and society. That's a fact. In society, there are no laws to defend or support racism, while in the church, it's very visible. The church services in our societies, that one hour on Sunday, is the most racial hour of our lives (S8).

As Eddy Van der Borgh (2009) argues, the real ecumenical challenge is often not that associated with various doctrinal debates, but rather the socio-cultural divisions of our churches, and race, and the persistent segregation that remains a sign of the afterlife of apartheid (Modiri, 2017:22), is key to this. Here, the South African church is not unique, yet in a stark manner reminds us of one of the ongoing challenges of unity in the church. The history of colonialism and racism continues to be a key challenge to the unity of the church, and given how this question took shape in global ecumenical responses to apartheid, its persistence in South Africa today should be of concern to the broader ecumenical movement.

This inheritance that all faith communities carry also elicited the theme of implication. Being implicated in the harmful and problematic effects of race and racism, some participants acknowledged, stems not merely from historical events unique to South Africa, but also from dominant, modern Christian visions that perpetuated and institutionalised racialisation (Jennings, 2010). As one participant stated:

Whether we like it or not, concerning racism, we are all guilty, we are all implicated as the body of Christ. And for that reason, it becomes absolutely pertinent that we address this issue. Because if racism is a sin, then it's a sin that we share as a church as a whole (P1).

3.2 The role of the youth

In recent years, young South Africans have played a critical role in raising questions on persistent racism and the ongoing effect of a history of colonialism and apartheid (Bowers Du Toit, 2022). This has been particularly visible in student movements around #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall as well as debates around decolonising education.

The role of young people in churches' current work on racism also emerged from presentations. After admitting that the issues of racism haven't really been on the agenda since 1994, one representative described charges of racism at church schools as the issue which brought the matter back onto the church's agenda. Another church noted that the perspective of young people will significantly change how the church will have to engage with issues around past and present racism and disunity:

we see the way forward as defining the challenges, firstly, of cohesion, and frankly discussing them – for many years it was a problem for us to openly talk about the challenges ... we want to consult our members, especially, we find, the younger generation, as they may have different expectation than older ones on what cohesion, or unity, looks like going forward (S6).

Here, churches are again reflective of the society in which they are part of, given the general pattern of younger South Africans insisting that questions around racism will have to be engaged, since it continues to impact their lives.

3.3 Theorising race

One persistent theme from participants' contributions was the ongoing need for clarifying what is being engaged when matters of race are on the table. This included not merely the multiplicity of assessments of the racialised context in South Africa - including diagnoses of the problems

and effects of race and racism, and assessments of what is at stake in addressing racialisation – but conceptual clarity within the lexicon that has developed on this topic.

Part of the need for clarification was due to the introduction of the language of whiteness. Multiple participants indicated either confusion or discomfort around the term:

I'm still battling to understand why we don't talk about racism. It's not as if we have dealt with racism; now we can move to something else. There somehow, for me, there's that in the choice of talking about whiteness as opposed to racism. So I don't think it's a theological issue as yet. It's an issue of understanding what we're dealing with. And we are not on the same page. (S4)

On the other hand, a clarification was offered by one of the white participants on the value of addressing whiteness:

Why it is helpful to talk about whiteness is that it was never mentioned before; it was simply taken as normal. That is the problem with our white kind of thinking. It never owned up to where it was thinking from. And so, it seems to be normal and neutral; it's like the air you breathe because you don't notice it. But to mention it means you are looking at it critically, so there is the possibility of change. (P2)

However, beyond the need for clarification of the language of whiteness, broader questions on how race and racism are understood are also visible.

That is where again the issue of definitions comes in, so that we are clear about what we are talking about ... naming the issues in some of the decisions that we make... so that when at the local level, congregations are acting, they know what it is that is being addressed at a particular point in time. (P3)

And later, one of the speakers responded:

I think there is uncertainty about understanding the issue which our theology needs to confront ... we are not in agreement on what the problem is, how can we begin to bring our theology ... part of

responsible doing of theology is analysis of the problem, the issue, the context, and I don't think we are there. (S4)

The language of racism itself is, however, part of the struggle. How do we name the problem at hand? What do we understand by the category of "racism"? More than one church indicated a preference for broader categories as opposed to the specific references to questions of racism or whiteness. Two churches indicated that the broader issues of "discrimination" are what is at stake, and another indicated that they describe the issue as "cohesion".

The point here is not to presume that any single definition or description will resolve the problem, but rather that the difficulty around naming issues around racism, as well as the difficulty around how we would describe the response to racism, reveals part of the work required by the ecumenical church. Here, the church is also embedded within the broader discourse, as an earlier attempt at theorising race from within the South African context indicated, our trouble with race is in part visible in the fact that we define racism in significantly different ways (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown 2011).

Continuing to probe the depths of the theological crisis that is the result of the way the Christian faith and theology have been intertwined with the history of race and colonialism is then vital but also developing a shared language across churches of different traditions.

3.4 Race and class

The intersection between race and class has been a long-standing point of contention in analyses of the South African situation. Debates around the primacy of race and class run across disciplines and were of significance in South African theological work emerging from the struggle against apartheid. Albert Nolan, in his *God in South Africa*, would, for example, argue for race as being employed in the service of capitalist production (Nolan 1988:72), and many overviews of the development of black theology note the movements between race and class analysis as vital (ex. Kee 2006:79–85, West 2014:349–353). The persistence of racialised inequalities has been of growing concern in South Africa in recent decades, with Mpofu-Walsh in a recent work summarising it with the statement that "apartheid did not die, it was privatised" (2021). The reality of immense racialised poverty and inequality is also key in churches reflecting on racism after apartheid.

One representative, who explicitly reminded of his position as a non-South African responsible for a regional denomination with a predominantly South African membership, stated quite explicitly that racism is in fact a purely economic matter:

While those of us in the interior of Africa, and who have obtained independence from colonial rule earlier than South Africa, have always known that political independence without economic wealth was not enough. It only become clear after the coming of freedom in South Africa that racism is most fundamentally about the protection of privileges and advances of certain population groups against the rest, such that racism in South Africa is much more about ownership and control of capital which in this case is in the hands of the white minority, even though this minority does not have political power and may never gain such political power in the foreseeable future. (S1)

One element of further work by churches, as one sector of the South African society as a whole, will have to be deepening the analysis of and proposals for an alternative to the current economic situation, which seems unable to break with the structures of historic injustice; “the racism of privilege evolving from historical antecedents” (S1) as one participant put it. However, given the globalised nature of economic structures, this immediately calls us back to global ecumenical work on the economy.

3.5 White flight

One of the most important themes from this engagement revolved around white flight. White flight is a phenomenon extensively described in work on, for example, the city of Atlanta in the United States of America, but applied to a variety of other contexts in past decades, and refers to patterns where white people residing in demographically changing neighbourhoods leave the neighbourhood *en masse* once a certain threshold of remaining white people are reached – they are described as “fleeing”. In South Africa, similar patterns have been described with the language of semigration - where white South Africans, rather than emigrate, moved into gated communities or towards areas of the country perceived to still be predominantly white (Ballard 2004).

Church leaders involved with this conversation would strive towards a “multi-racial” ideal in some form or the other; however, from multiple perspectives, patterns are described of white members fleeing majority black congregations. One representative described a denomination that has lost practically all its white members and then states as a reason, “because whites cannot be in any place where they are not in control. So, they eventually fled” (S1). A representative of another denomination described in detail a pattern where historically white congregations moved through a process of conscious integration – naming various programs of formation that were part of this transition – but despite the work done, at some point, the white members left. He specifically named the calling of black ministers into these congregations as a trigger for the leaving of white members.

3.6 White disengagement from integrated theological education

A sub-theme to white members fleeing majority black congregations is white theological students disengaging from spaces of majority black theological education. Examples around theological education that involve forms of communal residency were raised in particular ways. The concern raised is that where theological formation occurs in spaces where there is only a small number of white students, these white students withdraw from such spaces, preferring distance education.

Concerns about the construction of Christian whiteness in future generations should be raised around this phenomenon. Theological education and ministerial formation are key to the future formation of the church, and if white theological candidates fail to develop the skills to fully participate in spaces of theological education where there is neither a white majority nor it being under the control or tutelage of white church leaders, then this raises significant concerns about the future of the church.

3.7 Living as a white (numerical) minority

While this was seldom directly expressed, the implication of the history of white flight was captured by the one representative when asking, “Is there going to be a possibility of white people in South Africa to live with the fact that they are a minority?” (S2). This question is perhaps at the heart of the challenge of whiteness in the church in South Africa and captures

urgent work that will have to be done in terms of spiritual formation at the individual and congregational level.

The representative continued with a critique of a popularly held assumption that ecclesial racial integration should involve a “50/50” distribution of black and white members. The simple fact is that “Black people are in a majority. And if you’re going to understand racial integration, you must make peace with it. If we go to synod, if we go to conference, can we make peace?” (S2)

Here, the challenge of whiteness becomes particularly palpable. As one black representative made clear, this is by no means a simple matter, and will inevitably also call forth a challenge to white Christians:

... I suppose this is an element of kenosis that we should accept on both sides. Is it possible that white people can be willing to work with blacks, or amongst blacks, with the possibility that black people might not really like them, and be willing that even if they don’t like me, my Christian duty ... the price that one has to pay ... (P1)

On the other hand, a white theologian who has been in longstanding communion with a congregation where their family has often been the only white members, speaks of the transformative potential of exactly such communion.

What my wife and I often tell one another, when we are the only white people around ... we say to ourselves, we take nothing for granted. We shouldn’t be favoured because we are white, we’re just human, together. And that has been the gift of the black congregation for me, just learning to be. Not guilty about my whiteness, but always aware of my whiteness, and working against it to deracialise my way of being and my way of seeing and acting and speaking and listening and hearing. (P2)

Perhaps here we get to the heart of what questions around whiteness, Christianity, and the formation of an imagination which would undermine the reconstruction of race in South Africa should lead to. Do we have a faith that can sustain white people living and worshipping in majority black communities without the guarantee of white comfort? And what would the formation be that would ensure such communion, as well as

the conditions for a formation that would include the gift of being formed towards being “just human, together” (P2)?

3.8 White congregationalism

Black representatives articulated frustration around how white congregations and white members undermine and block processes of transformation and change in the church, identifying it explicitly with a congregationalist ecclesiology which emphasises the place of the local (predominantly white) congregation when confronted with a broader denominational or ecumenical (predominantly black) church which may have a different ecclesial practice and vision.

As a reverse of the challenge of participating as a white numerical minority, the white terms of integration are identified here as the challenge: “white people are fine with mixing, we’re fine there’s no problem as long as you do things our way.” (S5) This problem is exacerbated by the way race and class intersects, and white economic power is used to enforce ecclesial vision. One representative noted, “Also, another form of racism is, I think ... white churches actually hold finances, because they might not concur with a decision that has been made, whether doctrinally or a management decision that has been made.” (P4)

This is interpreted as a congregationalist ecclesiology by another representative: “I think the first general secretary of the UCCSA, Joseph Wing, who says ‘congregationalism may have been the best system for heaven, but on earth, it’s chaotic’... So, you can make whatever decision you want to make. Those with resources will apply the brakes.” (S1)

Here, whiteness then becomes a particular ecumenical and ecclesiological challenge, where those with the resources to do so withdraw into ecclesial communities reflecting particular shared identities, disallowing the formative potential of the majority black church in South Africa from touching white faith formation.

Behind these observations there is a reversal of dominant logics of assimilation and integration – dominant here referring to how black Christians are expected to assimilate to the practice of the white church in the name of racial integration – and an expectation that the act of white Christians formed into Christian practices of community in churches that

are majority black and black led, while not without conflict, would be a necessary route towards white Christian transformation.

4. Critically accompanying the church: theological research for Christian anti-racism

While the next steps in South African church engagement on race, racism, and whiteness remain an ongoing conversation, there is a strong consensus from representatives who participated that this remains a key priority, and that ongoing ecumenical engagement around the topic is vital. Some of the vital priorities for an ecumenical engagement on this topic that emerged in preliminary form is noted below, with the hope that this can initiate a process that opens up further avenues for exploration and action.

4.1 Continuation of “unfinished business” in a post-TRC context

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) continues to loom large in South African ecumenical discourses on racism and the church, for a variety of reasons. Not only was the TRC in many respects a spiritual, theological, and moral endeavour that laid a foundation for addressing the wounds of the past and for setting the reconciliation and justice agenda for the future, but it also galvanised ecumenical reflection and commitment to addressing the legacy of racialised injustice. It provides a moment in time where the role of the churches in the construction and maintenance of structures of racism was on display, and where their collective and individual failures in opposing apartheid were acknowledged (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998:59–92).

As a clear ecumenical attempt at collective anti-racist action after the end of legislated Apartheid, the Faith Communities hearings of the TRC became a case study in how organising principles in the work of anti-racism, such as truth-telling, reconciliation, and justice, could be enacted. These were legislated legally, decreed politically and religiously, and embodied performatively. Therefore, the continued study of these attempts, with all the successes and shortcomings in the almost 30 years since the TRC began, should inform future work (Van der Riet 2023). As one participant noted concerning the complexity of its legacy: “What’s the value of telling the truth? What’s the value of being truthful? I think somehow the TRC,

instead of helping us find a solution, theologically problematized the field for me, it threw more spanners into the works”. The work of the TRC, and the language of reconciliation (Van Wyngaard & Schneider, 2023), is still persistently under scrutiny – with recent student movements reopening a critical conversation around the afterlife of apartheid and the ongoing legacy of white racism and colonialism with renewed energy.

Even though the realities of inequality, division, and racialised systematic injustices continue to surface in public (religious) discourse, there have not been sustained, ecumenical dialogue spaces to engage on the theme of race, racism and whiteness in democratic South Africa. The most significant attempt has, in fact, been a re-enactment of the TRC Faith Communities hearings held on 8 and 9 October 2014. This consultation, the only TRC reenactment of its kind that tried to revisit the “unfinished business in the process of transformation” (Thesnaar & Hansen 2020:i), was held to revisit the commitments and recommendations made by faith communities in the TRC hearings of 1997. In the spirit of 20 years of democracy, the faith communities were invited to discuss their role in South Africa today, aiming to find ways “to again put the process of reconciliation back on the main agenda of all faith communities in the country” (Thesnaar & Hansen, 2020:38). During the recent consultation, a participant raised the question of whether value can be drawn, again, from the spaces created for dialogue, based on the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Desmond Tutu dreamt that after the TRC, thousands of little TRCs would take place, where people would be brought together to talk. I think for me to understand racism, and to really get into the skin of fellow South Africans and try and understand the suffering and the pain and the anger, we really need a platform to share and to talk. But where people feel they are safe to talk. (S6)

This also raised the question:

What is it that we can identify as a proper theological or biblical framework in creating a space for these stories of dialogue to emerge, and where people can feel safe, venturing into sensitive issues around sharing their own painful experiences? (P3)

The consultation itself followed such a methodology of constructing meaning together through sharing from personal narratives, aimed at discerning a way forward collectively. It was also suggested that if a process of dialogue and truth-telling is produced, it must be able to be replicated in local congregations.

4.2 Congregational practices

A key theme emerging through this consultation is the need for concrete responses to persistent racism and an emphasis on understanding and transforming congregational practices. While research on race, racism, and congregational studies has a long history both locally and in other contexts, church representatives indicated that much remains misunderstood or insufficiently explained. Given the ongoing challenges of division and conflict globally, including interreligious, ethnic and nationalistic conflicts, South Africa remains a context in which relevant knowledge is produced. The value of such local, indigenous, and contextual knowledge was emphasised during the consultation, and the suggestion was made that the next phase of ecumenical engagement on race, racism and whiteness should include the study of the lived reality and experiences in local congregations where attempts are being made, with varying degrees of success, at addressing issues of racism. Perhaps even more important, the ongoing shifts on how race and whiteness operate in South Africa, including the South African church, will continue to make such research a priority.

A key observation from the inputs of this ecumenical dialogue, emerging from the analysis above, is, however, to shift the gaze of congregational analysis in ways that critical whiteness studies have called for, shifting perspectives elsewhere. Most studies on racial integration in churches focus on Black members joining white congregations, but the real challenge is how white Christians can join and be shaped by Black-majority churches and leadership.

4.3 Race, whiteness, and theology

Church representatives disagreed on the need for explicitly theological reflections. Some argued quite explicitly that our difference of understanding stems from different definitions of race and racism – implying different

analyses of our context – while there is theological clarity, while others called for revisiting key theological themes – specifically questions of theological anthropology – in light of our contemporary insights into the way racism continues to impact our faith and society. As indicated above, key ecclesiological questions also emerged from these deliberations. Perhaps most telling, the repeated indication from church representatives that reflections around race and racism went silent after 1994, and only reemerged more recently, largely as a call from younger members, should be heard as a call for developing a grammar of faith that is better able to engage with the colonial and apartheid distortion of Christian theology and modern views of place and humans. The recent surge in South African studies doing exactly this² could be read as another round of responses to such a perceived need to critically accompany the church in this reflection.

Given the racialised context of colonialisation and apartheid during the 20th century, and its ensuing afterlife, race has been a central topic for churches and theology in the South African context. However, the linguistic landscape in analyses of race and racism, including ‘solutions’ for addressing racism and the afterlife of racialised division and injustice in South Africa, has always had multiple coordinates. This includes reconciliation, restitution, repair, redress, reconstruction, intergroup contact, social cohesion, community building, church unity, reconstruction, multiculturalism, and others. This indicates a multiplicity of assessments of the racialised context of South Africa, which were also displayed in a frequent return during the consultation to questions of conceptual clarity regarding what it means to be racist and definitions of racism and whiteness. That further work is required to develop a greater consensus on a theological analysis of the problem was again on display in these conversations.

Conclusion

The variety of themes that emerged from this consultation is a confirmation that the South African church has not yet addressed questions of racism

2 See for example the work of Mdingi on black theological anthropology (2014), Singata on black theology and eschatology or Forster (2019) and Kobe’s (2023) different engagements around questions of race and forgiveness.

in the past. It remains a concern for both church and society. Given the racialised history of denominational developments, where denominations were historically segregated either internally or through the formation of racial denominational bodies, this matter will simultaneously have to be on the agendas of denominational and ecumenical bodies. In different ways, we were made aware of ways in which white Christians continue practices of ecclesial resegregation, either through movements between congregations within denominational bodies, or even through movements across denominational bodies, to places where it is perceived that there is a greater level of white control. This, combined with broader themes that emerged from this conversation, provides a potential agenda for further theological reflection and ecclesial formation, the outcomes of which might also be of relevance to other contexts where questions around whiteness remain an important factor in undermining the unity of the Christian church.

The strong consensus from denominational leaders across the so-called “mainline” ecumenical spectrum that there has been little conscious engagement with questions of racism within and by the churches since 1994, but that there is a recent awareness that racism continues to be a challenge for the churches in South Africa, should direct our attention in important ways in the coming years. While the language of “whiteness” might not be commonly used within ecclesial circles, as was evidenced in the struggle from church representatives to relate to this, the problems identified clearly indicate that a critical engagement with how whiteness informs Christianity and Christian community is of vital importance for the coming years of church transformation in South Africa.

As we indicate in this analysis of church responses to questions of race and whiteness nearly thirty years after the end of legalized apartheid, there is a clear need to revisit the possible place of churches in responding to the unfinished work of the TRC, to focus specific attention on the intersection of congregational studies and anti-racism, to develop congregational practices that will contribute to the ongoing dismantling of structural racism, and further theological research needed to look into how South African theology was, and continues to be, formed by a colonial and white imagination, and what a faith and theology liberated from its colonial shackles would look like.

Of particular importance in the description and analysis above is the way in which white Christians potentially use congregational practices in acts which maintain segregation or contribute to resegregation, and how this is intertwined with the ongoing economic inequality along racial lines, which impacts power relations within the churches. The increased attention to questions of race and whiteness in theological research in recent years should therefore also be seen as a response to concrete challenges faced by faith communities.

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