

## **The legacy of liberation theologies in South Africa, with an emphasis on biblical hermeneutics**

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### *Abstract*

This article reflects on the historical and hermeneutical legacy of liberation theologies in South Africa. Beginning with an analysis of the hermeneutical contours of liberation theologies in general, the article then goes on to examine the shape and contributions of three significant liberation theologies in South Africa over the past thirty years: Black Theology, Contextual Theology, and African Women's Theology.

### **Introduction**

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life, and have life abundantly”, so says Jesus in John's Gospel (10:10, NRSV). In the latter part of the 1980s those working within the framework of liberation theologies began to explore other ways of talking about “liberation”. While the term “liberation” was still of immense rhetorical importance to us, given its rich heritage (Bonino 1975), the terrain from within which the term had arisen was shifting. There was not the same hope that the imagined socialist forms of political liberation would materialise. Of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union had much to do with this, as did the failure of socialist-inclined movements and parties to secure political office in Latin America, Africa and Asia. So we had to re-imagine what “liberation” might look like, both in terms of what liberation was “from” and what liberation was “to”. One way of talking about “liberation”, which began to emerge during this time, was to speak of “the God of life” and “idols of death” (Hinkelammert 1986). What liberation theology was about, we said, was taking sides with the God of life against the forces of death. The call and task of the Christian was to “read the signs of the times”, discerning where God was already at work bringing life in the midst of death, and then to become co-workers with God.

Liberation theology was to be done, within this terminology, in the context of the struggle for life in the midst of death. The determination that the notion of “struggle” (the ongoing process of God's project), rather than the notion of “liberation” (the end goal), is the appropriate emphasis in

liberation theologies, was the conviction of South African forms of liberation theology (Nolan 1988; Mosala 1989). The advantage of this formulation has been that there is a place for liberation theologies after political liberation, as is the case in South Africa. As long as the God of life is engaged against the idols of death, whether these be the idols of neo-liberal capitalism in our government's macro-economic policy, or the idols of patriarchy within our cultures and religions, or the idols of moral and medical discrimination in the context of HIV and AIDS, there is a need for forms of liberation theology that work with and proclaim the God of life.

While we may hope for the fullness of liberation, what John calls "abundant life", we recognise that for millions of people in our country and many more millions on our continent and around the world, the reality is a daily struggle for survival, for basic life. "Struggle" is the reality of life for many. Implicit in the notion of "struggle" in South African liberation theologies is its systemic nature. "The struggle" is not primarily an internal struggle within individuals, though it does include this; the primary struggle within liberation theologies is, to rephrase Ephesians, against systems and structures that bring death (Ephesians 6:12). The struggle is fundamentally against structural sin (West 2005b), but the nature of the structures is different, though often overlapping.

In this article I analyse the shape of liberation theologies in general, and then the shape of three liberation theologies that have emerged within South Africa in the past thirty years.<sup>1</sup> My focus throughout this article is on the biblical dimensions of liberation theologies, namely, biblical liberation hermeneutics.

### **The contours of biblical liberation hermeneutics**

Biblical liberation hermeneutics has at its core five interrelated emphases, which can be found across a range of liberation theologies. These five areas of emphasis include, according to Per Frostin's insightful analysis, "the choice of 'interlocutors', the perception of God, social analysis, the choice of theological tools, and the relationship between theory and practice" (Frostin 1988:6). I use Frostin as a guide because he draws on a wide range of related liberation theologies in dialogue with each other. The data Frostin uses are drawn substantially from the self-constituted dialogue of Third World theologians working together in forums such as EATWOT, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.

With respect to the first and fundamental emphasis, the choice of interlocutors, the emphasis in biblical liberation hermeneutics has been on

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<sup>1</sup> This article honours the pioneering work of Simon Maimela, who made contributions towards each of the trajectories analysed here.

social relations, not ideas or techniques, as has been the tendency in post-Enlightenment Western theology and biblical studies. This emphasis leads to the central question in biblical liberation hermeneutics, namely, “Who are the interlocutors of biblical interpretation?” To this question liberation hermeneutics gives a decisive answer: “a preferential option for the poor” (Frostin 1988:6). This choice of interlocutors is more than an ethical commitment, it is also an epistemological commitment, requiring an interpretive starting point within the social analysis of the poor themselves. The other four emphases of liberation criticism each flow from this first, which is why biblical liberation hermeneutics must always be more than an interpretive technique. The actual presence and participation of the poor in any interpretive act is pivotal.

As Frostin goes on to say, turning to the second emphasis of biblical liberation hermeneutics, the choice of interlocutors “has important consequences not only for the interpretation of social reality but also for the understanding of God” (Frostin 1988:7). As the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) so aptly expressed it, “The question about God in the world of the oppressed is not knowing whether God exists or not, but knowing on which side God is” (Frostin 1988:6). Echoing the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, we can say that while the primary interlocutor of Western biblical scholarship is the educated unbeliever, the primary interlocutor of biblical liberation hermeneutics is the uneducated believer (Gutiérrez 1973:241).

The third emphasis, that of social analysis, also derives from the first, for the option of the poor as the chief interlocutors of biblical liberation hermeneutics is based on a conflictual perception of social reality, affirming that there is a difference between the perspectives of the privileged “from above” and of the poor “from below” (Frostin 1988:7-8). EATWOT reports characterise the world as “a divided world”, where the activity of theology and biblical interpretation can only be done “within the framework of an analysis of these conflicts” (Frostin 1988:8). The poles of conflict or “struggle” (to use the term common in South African liberation theologies) include: rich-poor (economics), capitalists-proletariat (class), North-South (geography), male-female (patriarchy), white-black (race), dominant-dominated culture (ethnicity) (Frostin 1988:8); since Frostin compiled this list we might add to his list: able-disabled (normality), heterosexual-homosexual (sexuality), HIV-negative/ignorant-HIV-positive (morality), and so on. While EATWOT consistently stressed the interrelatedness of these struggles, different contexts give priority to different systems of oppression.

The fourth emphasis in Frostin’s analysis of the methodology of biblical liberation hermeneutics has to do with the choice of interpretive tools. “With a different interlocutor and a different perception of God, liberation theologians need different tools for their theological reflection”

(Frostin 1988:9). Using contemporary “eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation today to observe the kin struggles of the oppressed and exploited of the biblical communities” is the starting point (Mosala 1986c:196), with socio-historical tools being used to interrogate past and present power structures. While socio-historical modes of reading have been the preferred choice in liberation criticism, literary and semiotic modes of reading have also found a place within biblical liberation hermeneutics.

Given that power relations are central to biblical liberation hermeneutics, Marxist modes of analysis have been particularly significant, though “the actual use of Marxist analysis differs from group to group” (Frostin 1988:9), depending on the form of oppression that is the focus of a particular liberation struggle. So, for example, even though the relationship between capital and labour is clearly one dimension of the African struggle, African biblical liberation hermeneutics adopts a multi-dimensional analysis of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed, which includes race, gender and culture (Frostin 1988:182). Furthermore, while classical Marxism maintains that material production conditions human thought, African liberation criticism emphasises the creativity and capacity of the oppressed in a way that differs fundamentally from classical Marxism (West 1984:17; Frostin 1988:182-183; West 2003:15-45).

Frostin’s fifth and final emphasis is the dialectics between praxis and biblical interpretation. In biblical liberation hermeneutics, biblical interpretation is “a second act” (Frostin 1988:10). The first act is the praxis of action and reflection. The action is actual action in a particular struggle; integrally related to this action is reflection on the action; and integrally related to this action-induced reflection is further action, refined or reconstituted by the reflection on and reconsideration of theory (and so the cyclical process continues). Out of this first act of praxis, second order liberation biblical interpretation is constructed. How liberation interpretations are constructed and by whom is the subject of ongoing debate. Frostin favours a strong role for middle-class theologians and organic intellectuals in assisting the poor to break their silence “and create their own language” (Frostin 1988:10; see also Nadar 2009), but others, including myself, argue for a much more prominent place for the poor and marginalised (West 1995, 2003, 2009b).

### **Liberation theologies in South Africa**

Having briefly analysed the contours of liberation theologies in general, we now turn to consider three strands of liberation theology in South Africa.

These are Black Theology, Contextual Theology, and African Women's Theology.<sup>2</sup>

### *Black Theology*

Though the roots of Black Theology could be traced back to the very first encounters between southern African indigenous peoples and Bible bearing missionary/colonial forces (West 1995:52-55; 2004a), the actual use of the term "Black Theology" first emerged in the context of the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:144-164; Kretschmar 1986:58-68; Kritzinger 1988:57-91; Mosala 1989:1; Nolan 1988:3-4).

There have been a number of attempts to offer a periodisation of Black Theology (Moore 1994:), but in what follows I draw on three phases that Tinyiko Maluleke identifies. Though Maluleke's phases follow a chronological periodisation, he stresses the continuity between the phases:

The first phase starts with the formation of the Black Theology Project by the University Christian Movement in 1970, while the second starts in 1981 with the establishment of the Institute for Contextual Theology. In phase one, Black Theology, though acknowledging Blackness to be a state of mind, nevertheless took objective Blackness as its starting point in such a way that all Black people were the focus of liberation and the whole Bible (Christianity) could be used for liberation. In phase two, objective Blackness, in and of itself, is no longer sufficient. Not all Black people are the focus of Black Theology. Not all theology done by Black people is Black Theology and not all the Bible (Christianity) is liberating. Furthermore, while phase one Black Theology was closely linked to the Black Consciousness philosophy, phase two Black Theology recognized a wider ideological ferment within the Black Theology movement. Most distinctive of the second phase has been the increasing introduction of Marxist historical materialism in the hermeneutic of Black Theology (Maluleke 1998b:61).

In terms of biblical hermeneutics, phase one is characterised by a hermeneutics of trust. A hermeneutics of trust is evident in a number of respects.

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, in an overlapping essay, I have discussed three other strands in South African liberation theology, namely, African Theology, Confessing Theology, and HIV-Positive Theology (West 2009a).

First, as in much of African Theology (and African American Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology), the Bible is considered to be a primary source of Black Theology (Mbiti 1977). The Bible belongs to Black Theology in the sense that doing theology without it is unthinkable. Second, the Bible is perceived to be primarily on the side of the black struggle for liberation and life in South Africa. The Bible belongs to Black Theology in the sense that the struggle for liberation and life is central to them both (Tutu 1983:124-129).

While there is definitely an awareness that there are different, sometimes complementing and sometimes contradicting, theologies in the Bible, this is understood as evidence of the thoroughly contextual nature of the Bible and, because these proponents perceive that the pervasive theological trajectory in the Bible is one of liberation, the plurality of theologies in the Bible is unproblematic for Black Theology (Tutu 1983:106). Those who use the Bible for domination are, therefore, misinterpreting the Bible, because the Bible is basically on the side of liberation.

The biblical hermeneutics of phase two Black Theology inaugurates one of the most significant contributions to liberation theologies anywhere in the world. While the “external” problem of the misuse of the Bible by oppressive and reactionary white South African Christians remains, phase two Black Theology identifies a more fundamental problem – the “internal” problem of the Bible itself. Takatso Mofokeng is critical of those who concentrate only on the external problem, those who accuse “oppressor-preachers of *misusing* the Bible for their oppressive purposes and objectives” and “preachers and racist whites of not practising what they preach”. It is clear, Mofokeng maintains, that these responses are “based on the assumption that the Bible is essentially a book of liberation”. While Mofokeng concedes that these responses, so characteristic of phase one-type biblical hermeneutics, have a certain amount of validity to them, the crucial point he wants to make is that there are numerous “texts, stories and traditions in the Bible which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature”. What is more, he insists, any attempts “to ‘save’ or ‘co-opt’ these oppressive texts for the oppressed only serve the interests of the oppressors” (Mofokeng 1988:37-38). Itumeleng Mosala is the clearest of phase two Black theologians on this matter. In an early essay on “The Use of the Bible in Black Theology” he is the first black theologian to question in print the ambiguous ideological nature of Bible itself (Mosala 1986c; 1989:1-42).

Mosala's contention is that most of the Bible “offers no certain starting point for a theology of liberation within itself”. For example, he continues, the biblical book of Micah “is eloquent in its silence about the ideological struggle waged by the oppressed and exploited class of monarchic Israel”; “it is a ruling class document and represents the ideological and political

interests of the ruling class". As such there "is simply too much de-ideologization to be made before it can be hermeneutically straightforward in terms of the struggle for liberation" (Mosala 1989:120-121). Instead of the Bible as the starting point for Black theology, those committed to the struggles of the black oppressed and exploited people "cannot ignore the history, culture, and ideologies of the dominated black people as their primary hermeneutical starting point" (Mosala 1989:197).

However, while the Bible cannot be the primary starting point for Black Theology, "there are enough contradictions within the book [of Micah, for example] to enable eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation today to observe the kin struggles of the oppressed and exploited of the biblical communities in the very absences of those struggles in the text" (Mosala 1986c:196). So it is "the ideological condition and commitment of the reader issuing out of the class circumstances of such a reader" that are fundamental (Mosala 1986c:196). Given this starting point, and because the Bible is "a product and a record of class struggles" (Mosala 1986c:196), black theologians are able to detect "glimpses of liberation and of a determinate social movement galvanized by a powerful religious ideology in the biblical text" (Mosala 1989:40). "The problem", he argues, is not the existence of liberatory layers in the Bible, but of "developing an adequate hermeneutical framework that can rescue those liberating themes from the biblical text", for we "cannot successfully perform this task by denying the oppressive structures that frame what liberating themes the texts incode" (Mosala 1989:40).

While "even a semiological approach to texts" demonstrates the need for such a framework (Mosala 1989:40-41), central to Mosala's hermeneutics of liberation is the search for a theoretical perspective that can locate both the Bible and the black experience within appropriate socio-historical contexts. Historical-critical tools are used to delimit and historically locate particular biblical texts; and once a text has been historically situated, sociological tools are used to provide a "thick" description of the social context of production. The sociological perspective Mosala uses is historical-materialism, particularly its understanding of class struggle. Historical-materialism provides the sociological categories and concepts necessary to read and critically appropriate both black history and culture and the Bible. "The category of [historical-materialist] struggle becomes an important hermeneutical factor not only in one's reading of his or her history and culture but also in one's understanding of the history, nature, ideology, and agenda of the biblical texts" (Mosala 1989:9).

In order to undertake this kind of analysis, Mosala argues, black interpreters must be engaged in the threefold task of Terry Eagleton's "revolutionary cultural worker": a task that is projective, polemical, and appropriative. While Mosala does not doubt that (phase one) Black Theology is

“projective” and “appropriative” in its use of the Bible, it is “certainly *not* polemical – in the sense of being critical – in its biblical hermeneutics” (Mosala 1989:2). What Mosala means by this is that Black Theology has not interrogated the text ideologically in class, cultural, gender, and age terms; Black Theology has tended to read the biblical text as “an innocent and transparent container of a message or messages” (Mosala 1989:41).

Returning to Maluleke’s analysis, the contours of the third (post-liberation) phase of Black Theology are more difficult to discern, says Maluleke, because “we are living in and through it” (Maluleke 1998b:61). Nevertheless, he does offer a tentative sketch of the third phase.<sup>3</sup> Repudiating allegations of Black Theology’s “death” after liberation, Maluleke argues that the third phase of Black Theology draws deeply on resources within earlier phases of Black Theology, and projects these formative impulses into the future.

First, while the plurality of ideological positions and political strategies in the construction of Black Theology has been acknowledged since the early 1980s, the ideological and political plurality within Black Theology in the 1990s is more marked and brings with it a new 90s-type temptation that must be refused. Ideological and political plurality in post-apartheid (and post-colonial) South Africa must avoid, argues Maluleke, both the temptation of an uncommitted play with pluralism and the temptation of a despairing paralysis (perhaps even an abandonment) of commitment. Despite the pressures of ideological and political plurality, commitment remains the first act in Black Theology, whatever the particular brand (Maluleke 1998b:61).

Second, if race was the central category in the first phase of Black Theology, and if the category of class was placed alongside it in the second phase of Black Theology, then gender as a significant category has joined them in the third phase of Black Theology. But, once again, the tendency to minimise the foundational feature of Black Theology, namely, race, must be resisted, argues Maluleke. Gender, like class, in South Africa always has a racial component. Furthermore, warns Maluleke, in a context “where race is no longer supposed to matter” (Maluleke 1998b:61), racism often takes on different guises and becomes “more ‘sophisticated’” (Maluleke 1998b:62).

The third and final feature of phase three Black Theology has three related prongs, each of which might be considered as a separate element. Here, however, I stress their connectedness, as does Maluleke, and thus treat them as subelements of a formative feature of the third phase of South African Black Theology. The formative feature of phase three Black Theology is the identification of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and African

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<sup>3</sup> The Maluleke paper I am referring to here is a brief “concept paper”, and so I sometimes make fairly bold inferences from the available clues. Wherever possible, I have used Maluleke’s other published work to enhance my understanding of the moves he makes in the concept paper.



Independent/Instituted/Initiated Churches (AICs) as “significant” (perhaps even primary?) dialogue partners (Maluleke 1998b:62).

Subsumed under this general feature, the first of the three prongs has to do with culture. Whereas phase one Black Theology “ventured somewhat into cultural ... issues”, phase two “became more and more concerned with the struggle of black people against racist, political and economic oppression” (Maluleke 1998a:133). However, “At crucial moments connections with African culture would be made – provided that culture was understood as a site of struggle rather than a fixed set of rules and behaviours” (Maluleke 1998a:133). Culture remains problematised in phase three, but the envisaged rapprochement with ATRs and AICs that characterises phase three, foregrounds culture in a form not found in phase two.

The second prong has to do with solidarity with the poor. In each of its phases, Black Theology “has sought to place a high premium on *solidarity with the poor* and not with the state or its organs – however democratic and benevolent such a state might be”. While such a position “must not be mistaken with a sheer anti-state stance ... Black Theology is first and foremost not about the powerful but about the powerless and the silenced”. And, (and I stress this conjunction) “serious interest” in ATRs and AICs affords Black Theology in phase three “another chance of demonstrating solidarity with the poor – for ATRs is [sic] the religion of the poor in this country” (Maluleke 1998b:62).

Closely related to the first and second prong, but particularly to the first, is a third. By making culture a site of struggle, Black Theology “managed to relativise the Christian religion sufficiently enough to encourage dialogue not only with ATRs but with past and present struggles in which religions helped people to take part, either in acquiescence or in resistance” (Maluleke 1998a:133). If, as Mosala has argued (Mosala 1986b), African culture can be a primary site of a hermeneutics of struggle for African Theology, supplemented only with a political class-based hermeneutics, then Christianity is not a necessary component in a Black Theology of liberation (Maluleke 1998a:133). A key question, therefore, for the third phase of South African Black Theology is, “Have black and African theologies made the necessary epistemological break from orthodox or classical Christian theology required to effect ‘a creative reappropriation of traditional African religions’ (Mosala 1986b:100)?” (Maluleke 1998a:135).

Responding to his own question, Maluleke argues that South African Black Theology has tended to use “classical Christian tools, doctrines and instruments – for example the Bible and Christology” for its purposes. Black Theology has used Christianity to “get the land back and get the land back without losing the Bible” (Mosala 1987:194).

Realising that Christianity and the Bible continue to be a “haven of the Black masses” (Mofokeng 1988:40), black theologians reckoned that it would not be advisable simply “to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible”. Instead the Bible and the Christian faith should be shaped “into a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of just leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people” (Mofokeng 1988:40). Preoccupation with Christian doctrines and ideas was, for black theology therefore, not primarily on account of faith or orthodoxy considerations, but on account of Christianity’s apparent appeal to the black masses (Maluleke 1998a:134).

Given this analysis, Maluleke goes on to argue:

What needs to be re-examined now [in phase three] however, is the extent to which the alleged popularity of Christianity assumed in South African black theology is indeed an accurate assessment of the religious state of black people. If it were to be shown that ATRs are as popular as Christianity among black South Africans then in not having given much concerted attention to them, black theology might have overlooked an important resource. There is now space for this to be corrected by making use of alternative approaches (Maluleke 1998a:134).

As I have shown, via Maluleke’s analysis, one of the important features of phase three Black Theology is the recognition, recovery and revival of its links with ATRs and AICs, and in so doing renewing its dialogue with African Theology in its many and various forms. In other words, Maluleke could be said to be revisiting and questioning Mofokeng’s assertion that “African traditional religions are too far behind most blacks” (Mofokeng 1988:40). Is this actually the case, asks Maluleke? Gabriel Setiloane asks the question even more starkly: “why do we continue to seek to convert to Christianity the devotees of African traditional religion?” (Setiloane 1977:64, cited in Maluleke 1997a:13). “This”, says Maluleke, “is a crucial question for all African theologies [including South African Black Theology] as we move into the twenty-first century” (Maluleke 1997a:13).

Alongside this question, of course, looms the related question, prompted by Maluleke’s analysis, of whether Black Theology can be practised without the Bible.<sup>4</sup> If it is true, as is claimed by both Mofokeng and

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<sup>4</sup> Randall Bailey, an African American biblical scholar, puts the question slightly differently, but in a closely related sense, when he argues “that unless one is aware of one’s own cultural

Mosala, that the Bible is primarily of strategic, not substantive (see Cady 1986; and West 1995:103-130) importance to Black Theology – a claim that is vigorously rejected by Desmond Tutu (1983), Allan Boesak (1984), Simon Maimela (1986, 1991a), and many other black theologians (see Kunnie 1986) – then there are good grounds for a Black Theology without “the Book”.

However, Maluleke, like Mofokeng, doubts whether “pragmatic and moral arguments can be constructed in a manner that will speak to masses without having to deal with the Bible in the process of such constructions” (Maluleke 1996:14). In the 1990s, and probably into the millennium, the Bible remained “a ‘haven of the Black masses’” (Maluleke 1996:14). And as long as it is a resource, it must be confronted, “precisely at a hermeneutical level” (Maluleke 1996:14). Quite what Maluleke means by this is not yet clear, but he does offer some clues, which emerge in his dialogue with the biblical hermeneutics of African Women’s Theology (Maluleke 1997a:14-16).

He agrees with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who speaks for many African women (see below), when she says that the problem with the Bible in Africa is that “throughout Africa, the Bible has been and continues to be absolutized: it is one of the oracles that we consult for instant solutions and responses” (Oduyoye 1995:174, cited in Maluleke 1997a:15). “However”, continues Maluleke, while many African biblical scholars and theologians are locked into a biblical hermeneutics that makes “exaggerated connections between the Bible and African heritage ... on the whole, and in practice, [ordinary] African Christians are far more innovative and subversive in their appropriation of the Bible than they appear” (Maluleke 1997a:14-15). Although they “may mouth the Bible-is-equal-to-the-Word-of-God formula, they are actually creatively pragmatic and selective in their use of the Bible so that the Bible may enhance rather than frustrate their life struggles” (Maluleke 1996:13). The task before Black Theology, then, is “not only to develop creative Biblical hermeneutic methods, but also to observe and analyse the manner in which African Christians ‘read’ and view the Bible” (Maluleke 1996:15).

This more descriptive and less prescriptive task lies before us, and there are signs that it is being taken up (West 2004b). As the work of Mofokeng and Mosala has intimated, ordinary black South Africans have adopted a variety of strategies in dealing with an ambiguous Bible, including rejecting it and strategically appropriating it as a site of struggle. But we need to be more precise, and so in order to do justice to Maluleke’s project in our post-liberation context, much more detailed case studies need to be done.

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biases and interests in reading the text and appropriating the tradition, one may be seduced into adopting another culture, one which is diametrically apposed to one’s own health and well-being” (Bailey 1998).

This descriptive task is as important as reappropriating Mosala's socio-historical materialist biblical hermeneutics in our post-liberation context. Much has changed, but much remains the same. As Alistair Kee recognises, one of the most significant contributions of South African Black Theology has been in "tracing the origins of oppression back to interest and relations of power" (a contribution he attributes to Mokgethi Motlhabi, 1973) and in so doing rooting "oppression in the economic base of society", a contribution exemplified by Mosala (Kee 2006:87), and given fresh analytical rigour by Sampie Terreblanche's work on South Africa's history and present as one characterised by economic inequality (Terreblanche 2002). In summary, the biblical hermeneutic task after liberation is both polemical and descriptive of what actually happens with the Bible among African Christians.

From the perspective of Black Theology, then, there is still plenty left on the agenda. There are even indications of a fourth phase in Black Theology, in which African Christianity is reconceptualised as a form of African (Traditional) Religion (Maluleke 2004).<sup>5</sup> Though our post-liberation context has drawn many of our most productive black theologians into governmental and educational leadership, the trajectories established by Black Theology remain intact, though the capacity to develop them has been somewhat diminished.

### *Contextual Theology*

The South African apartheid state, with its overt theological foundation, demonised liberation theology and relentlessly detained anyone associated with such forms of theology. The term "contextual theology" was coined to subvert the apartheid state's efforts, and became "an umbrella term embracing a variety of particular or situational theologies" in South Africa (Speckman & Kaufmann 2001a:xi). Unfortunately, however, because of a lack of sustained collaboration between Latin American-derived contextual theologies and Black Theology-derived liberation theologies (Cochrane 2001:70-73; Maluleke 2001b:368), "contextual theology" also came to be considered as another, separate, form of liberation theology.

In its particular form, Contextual Theology (and the upper case is appropriate here) clusters around at least four poles. The first is the work of Albert Nolan, who drew on elements of Latin American Liberation Theology and re-contextualised and popularised them in South Africa (Kaufmann 2001; see also Nolan 1986; Nolan 1988). The second coordinating point for Contextual Theology has been the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT),

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<sup>5</sup> There are hints of this kind of conceptualisation in the work of earlier black theologians (see Kunnie 1986:163-164), notwithstanding the cautious, even suspicious, appropriation of culture by some black theologians in the 1980s (see Thagale 1985; Chikane 1985).

an institution with whom Nolan worked for many years, but which included the contributions of a host of church leaders and Christian activists of all kinds (Cochrane 2001). At its inaugural conference in 1982, Albert Nolan characterised the vision of the Institute for Contextual Theology as follows, and in doing so provided a foundational understanding of Contextual Theology itself. The ICT, Nolan said,

wants to do theology quite explicitly and consciously from within the context of real life in South Africa. It wants to start from the fundamentally political character of life in South Africa. It wants to take fully into account the various forms of oppression that exist in South Africa: racial oppression, the oppression of the working class and the oppression of women. And finally it wants to start from the actual experience of the oppressed themselves (cited in Kaufmann 2001:23-24).

The third pole around which Contextual Theology in its particular form has located itself is *The Kairos Document* (Kairos 1986). *The Kairos Document* was important both as a process and a product. As a product, *The Kairos Document* articulated “Theology” as contested. *The Kairos Document* identified and analysed three contending theologies in South Africa: State Theology, Church Theology and Prophetic Theology. Briefly, “State Theology” is the theology of the South African apartheid State, which “is simply the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy” (Kairos 1986:3). “Church Theology” is (in a limited, guarded and cautious way) critical of apartheid. “Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation” (Kairos 1986:9). *The Kairos Document* moves towards a “Prophetic Theology”, a theology that “speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand” (Kairos 1986:18).

While *The Kairos Document* had a number of shortcomings, especially its failure to engage overtly with South African Black Theology and its failure to recognise the ideological nature of the Bible, it did make a massive impact on how we thought about religion, particularly Christianity, during the struggle for liberation. Roundly and publically condemned by the apartheid state, *The Kairos Document* was also rejected by many of the institutional churches, including the so-called English-speaking churches. The initial wave of responses from the churches questioned the process of the theological

analysis contained in *The Kairos Document* (Van der Water 2001:36-43). Theology that was made in the streets rather than in ecclesiastically controlled sites could not be proper theology, they claimed. Subsequent responses were more considered, but their spokesmen (mainly) still found it difficult to acknowledge that the theology of the church had failed to read “the signs of the times”, a key concept in *The Kairos Document*. That the public theology of the churches, “Theology” with a capital “T”, was merely a form of either State Theology or Church Theology struck a theological nerve, and the value of the analysis remains relevant for our post-liberation context.

The fourth pole around which Contextual Theology could be said to cluster is its most important contribution. As a liberation theology, theological process was of particular importance to Contextual Theology. Describing the process that produced *The Kairos Document*, Nolan emphasised that “it was not planned or foreseen by the staff of ICT. It simply happened as a result of ICT’s method of doing theology”. Nolan then goes on to characterise this method briefly, saying that ICT “simply enables people to do their own theological reflection upon their own praxis and experience”, by “bringing Christians together, facilitating discussion and action, recording what people say, and doing whatever research may be required to support the reflections, arguments and actions of the people” (Nolan 1994:212). Using this method, two ICT staff members facilitated a process, beginning in Soweto “one Saturday morning in July 1985”, “to reflect upon South Africa’s latest crisis, the recently declared State of Emergency” (Nolan 1994:213). This led to *The Kairos Document*, a theological document that

was vividly and dramatically contextual: it came straight out of the flames of the townships in 1985. Those who had no experience of the oppression, the repression, the suffering and the struggles of the peoples in the townships at the time were not able to understand the faith questions that were being tackled there, let alone the answers (Nolan 1994:213).

Elaborating on the process or method of Contextual Theology, James Cochrane, one of the founders of the Institute for Contextual Theology, and both a proponent of and commentator on Contextual Theology, argues that “one of the basic genres of contextual theology propagated in South Africa, preeminently by Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Students and Albert Nolan, comes in the guise of the tripartite command to ‘see-judge-act’” (Cochrane 2001:76). In practice, McGlory Speckman and Larry Kaufmann tell us, this method “meant starting with a social analysis, then proceeding to the reading of the [biblical] text and then to action” (Speckman & Kaufmann 2001b:4). “Seeing” involves careful social analysis of a particular context at a particular time, what was referred to as “reading the

signs of the times”. “Judging”, which precedes acting, but which is based on having acted already, “requires that we analyse the conditions of oppression in our context. The ‘acting’ that follows is enriched twice over by the first two discursive moves of seeing and judging. We assume that our action is both better informed as a result and more effective” (Cochrane 2001:77).

Developed by Fr Joseph Cardijn in the 1930s in Belgium, where he was working as a chaplain among factory workers (De Gruchy Undated), “See-Judge-Act” has been adopted and adapted in a range of Third World contexts, including South Africa. For example, among the Young Christian Workers (YCW), young workers begin by analysing the conditions experienced by themselves and their friends at work, at home and at school (“See”). They assess the situation “in the light of the Gospel” (“Judge”), and then try to improve the situation by taking appropriate action to change conditions (“Act”) (Stevens 1985:25-26). While Contextual Theology after liberation has produced nothing as prophetically seminal as *The Kairos Document*, and while the Institute for Contextual Theology is more or less defunct, its “See-Judge-Act” methodology remains relevant in addressing the post-liberation context. Contextual Theology has lent its name and its methodology to a form of collaborative and emancipatory Bible study known as contextual Bible study (West 1993, 2006, 2009b). Operating within the methodological framework of “See-Judge-Act”, contextual bible study (using the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research in the University of KwaZulu-Natal as its institutional base) utilises a four-phase interpretive process. It begins with a particular oppressed community’s social concern (e.g. unemployment) and the analysis that informs this concern, which are then brought into dialogue with a particular biblical text (usually an unfamiliar text or an unfamiliar textual unit). The interpretations that are generated in this initial encounter between context and text are recorded. The second phase of the process then moves into a close and careful literary engagement with the text, using a range of literary-type questions (e.g. “Who are the characters in this text and what do we know about them”). A related third phase then shifts into a socio-historical engagement with the text, using resources the community already has and/or input from biblical scholarship. Importantly, this third phase flows organically from phase two and is, therefore, shaped by the questions the text and context generate for the community. The fourth and final phase returns the focus of the process to the community’s own knowledge and resources, re-engaging with the initial community concern. The process begins, then, with what we call “community consciousness”, moves through literary and socio-historical forms of “critical consciousness”, and concludes with “community consciousness”. Throughout this process there is a collaborative reading relationship between the socially engaged biblical scholar and the community.

In this form and in other forms (see Speckman 2007), Contextual Theology, though many of its founding practitioners and institutions are no longer operative, still offers important methodological resources for working with the Bible in oppressed communities after liberation.

#### *African Women's Theology*

African Women's Theology in South Africa both partakes of and contests "feminist" theology (Haddad 2000:142-175). It partakes of "feminist" theology in that it shares family resemblances with other forms of "feminist" theology, but it contests the dominant white feminist version. In particular, African Women's Theology includes and integrates the categories of race, class, and culture with that of gender (Haddad 2000:145-156). As Beverley Haddad argues, quoting Obioma Nnaemeka, a "major flaw of feminist attempts to tame and name the feminist spirit in Africa is their failure to define African feminism on its own terms rather than in the context of Western feminism" (Haddad 2000:154, citing Nnaemeka 1998:6). This is why the work of African women, such as that produced by the Association of African Woman Scholars and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (which emerged from within EATWOT) have marked "an important step in the process of African women defining feminist issues in their own terms" (Haddad 2000:154).

Within South Africa more specifically, the debate about "feminism" has been strongly shaped by our apartheid history, so that "race and class divides prescribe the parameters" (Haddad 2000:156).

This has resulted in a schism between academic feminists who have tended to be white, middle class women who have to a large extent been inactive in the political liberation struggle, and activists deeply committed to this struggle who have tended to be black and working class. Human rights and political liberation issues, strong on the activist agenda, hardly featured on the academic agenda which instead focused on equality as understood by first world feminists (Haddad 2000:156).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and into the present, the apartheid legacy "haunts South African women in their dialogue and in their activist and academic practice" (Haddad 2000:157).

As in all Third World contexts, whether supported by published work or not (Jayawardena 1986; Wieringa 1995, 1998), so in South Africa, women's resistance to oppression has been an enduring part of the previous century, though usually in racially divided forms (Haddad 2000:157-161). In



the 1950s there were serious organisational attempts to constitute a non-racial women's movement, which had some success, particularly those associated with the non-racialism political agenda of the African National Congress (ANC). However, with the banning of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960 much of this non-racial momentum was lost, only to be reconstituted within the Mass Democratic Movement in the 1980s (Haddad 2000:159-160). This non-racial strand within the women's project in South Africa "laid the foundation for the launching of the Women's National Coalition in 1992", which was itself given impetus by the unbanning of the ANC and PAC in 1990 (Haddad 2000:162). However, though the Women's National Coalition "was an attempt to draw women together from different backgrounds of race, class, religion, and political persuasion", "racial tensions persisted" (Haddad 2000:162; see also Fester 1997).

In the post-apartheid context, South African women were deeply aware that debates between women over "perceived interests and very real differences", the lack of unity and "apparent failure to identify and struggle together against a single patriarchy have led to a perception that South African women's struggles lack a feminist consciousness" (Haddad 2000:167; citing Kemp et al. 1995:133). Writing from the perspective of Black women, Amanda Kemp, Nozizwe Madlala, Asha Moodley, and Elaine Salo, identified three central assumptions that had shaped and should constitute the women's project:

First, our identities as women are shaped by race, class, and gender, and these identities have moulded our particular experiences of gender oppression. Second, our struggles as feminists encompass the struggles for national liberation from a brutal white state. Third, we have to challenge and transform Black patriarchies even though Black men have been our allies in the fight for national liberation. These three concerns are of equal importance and are often inextricably linked so that a theoretical perspective that insists on isolating certain issues as feminist and others as not is alienating (Haddad 2000:167; citing Kemp et al. 1995:133).

The situation was not that different in the women's theological project in South Africa, as Haddad shows:

In the early stages of the women's theological project in the 1980s, white women drew their impetus from feminist theological thinking from the first world. Black women increasingly aligned themselves with women theologians from the third world and African American women who had begun theolo-

gising their experiences as “womanist” theologians (Haddad 2000:195).

Indeed, what can be considered the first feminist theology conference in South Africa, hosted by the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in 1984 under the title “Women’s struggle in South Africa: feminist theology”, was attended almost entirely by Black women activists from church-based and community-based organisations (Haddad 2000:201). Within days of this conference another conference was hosted, in the same region, by the University of South Africa, then a bastion of white (somewhat progressive) Afrikaner scholarship, under the title “Sexism and feminism in theological perspective”, which was attended largely by white middle-class academic women (Haddad 2000:201). These two racial trajectories continued well into the 1980s and 1990s.

An emerging strand with the work of Black South African women in the 1980s, Haddad argues (Haddad 2000:202-204), was a theological gender critique of Black patriarchy in general and Black Theology in particular (Jordaan 1987, 1991; Mncube 1984; Mosala 1984, 1986a), a critique that has been at least partially heard by Black male theologians (Maimela 1991b; Mandew 1991; Mosala 1992; Maluleke 1997b). Though consistently subsumed by the larger black struggle for political liberation, and though hesitant to foreground gender concerns immediately after liberation when African culture was being recovered, African Women’s Theology has worked with a steady beat (to borrow a phrase from African American biblical scholarship (Bailey 2003)).

Located differently, one white strand situated predominantly in white academic institutions and shaped by white feminist discourse and one black strand situated predominantly in para-church and other activist organisations and shaped by Black Consciousness, the two main strands of South African “feminist” discourse have found a further dialogue partner in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth, the Circle). The Circle has not only provided an institutional forum for individuals from these two strands to collaborate, it has also reconfigured the discourse of African Women’s Theology.

The Circle arose out of a demand by women within the EATWOT to be heard and their presence taken seriously (Fabella & Oduyoye 1988; Haddad 2000:197-199; Oduyoye 1983). Meeting as a group for the first time in 1989 in Ghana, African women theologians, including two South African representatives, established the Circle (Haddad 2000:198; Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1990). Constituted to include African women from the whole continent and of all faiths and with a specific agenda to publish African Women’s Theology (Oduyoye 1990:48; Phiri 1997:69), the Circle “has been instrumental in linking women’s theology in South Africa with the rest of

Africa” (Haddad 2000:200). While the Circle has not obliterated the differences that have constituted South African Women’s Theology, it has provided an opportunity for these differences and their implications for future ”feminist” work together “to be confronted and dealt with more openly” (Haddad 2000:201; see also Kanyoro 2001:104), albeit in an institutional environment that privileges academic discourse.

Within these broader frameworks of “feminist” discourse in South Africa, South African women’s biblical hermeneutics has made a substantial contribution. Among the most significant are the work of Madipoane (ngwana’ Mphahlele) Masenya, who has advocated a particularly African women’s form of biblical hermeneutics known as *Bosadi* hermeneutics (Masenya 1997; Masenya 2001); Musa Dube who, though from Botswana, has had a major impact on South African biblical hermeneutics and who has pioneered an African women’s postcolonial feminist biblical hermeneutics (Dube 1997, 2000); Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie, who has posed the question of whether Black women in South Africa “read the Bible in light of the post-apartheid Constitution that gives her equality” (Plaatjie 2001:117); Sarojini Nadar, who has used womanist and literary hermeneutical categories to develop ways of working with the Bible among oppressed women, particular those in the South African Indian community (Nadar 2001, 2003); and Makhosazana K. Nzimande, who has advocated a postcolonial *Imbokodo* biblical hermeneutics in post-apartheid South Africa (Nzimande 2008, 2010). Indeed, I agree entirely with Tinyiko Maluleke when he says, “African women’s theologies [and their accompanying biblical hermeneutics] represent the most creative dimension of African theology during our times. There is no doubt that, in the past twenty years, no dimension of Christian theology in Africa has grown in enthusiasm, creativity, and quality like women’s theology” (Maluleke 2001a:237).

Maluleke then goes on to contrast the energy and creativity of African Women’s Theology with the other forms of (traditionally male dominated) theology we have been discussing, saying:

At the start of the new millennium, there is a palpable sense of fatigue in male theology. At one level there is a frivolous search for new metaphors and new labels with very little in-depth engagement with substantial issues of methodology. At another level, African male theology appears to have lost its passion, its compassion, and its prophetic urge. African theology is bewildered and confused by the dismantling of apartheid, increased globalization, the forceful emergence of issues of gender, ecology, and human rights, and the irruption of a new world order. Admittedly, some male theologians have been trying to respond theologically to the new situation. But many

of these responses lack the freshness, enthusiasm, creativity, and sharpness that one senses in the writing of African women (Maluleke 2001a:237-238).

Maluleke not only neatly summarises the state of liberation theologies in South Africa after liberation, he also introduces some of the contextual features our liberation theologies are now facing.

### **Other issues, in conclusion**

There is not the space here to go into any depth about the many cross-cutting issues that confront South African liberation theologies, except to say that poverty, unemployment, globalisation, gender violence, HIV, the apartheid land legacy,<sup>6</sup> crime, corruption, exploitation of the environment, and discrimination against forms of sexual orientation, ensure that the poor, the marginalised, and the oppressed remain with us in a variety of forms. As long as they do, there remains the need for theologies of liberation after political liberation. The struggle of the God of life against the idols of death continues. There is also not the space here to examine the biblical hermeneutical challenges that our engagement with these contextual realities generate, except to say that they remain centred around the relationship between and the respective resources of socially engaged biblical scholars and those poor, marginalised and oppressed communities for whom the Bible is a significant text.

Our new Constitution and the other related structures that constitute our post-liberation South Africa are indeed signs of hope, but only if we continue to fight for them and against the macro-economic and macho-patriarchal systems that constantly threaten to co-opt and/or subsume them. There will be no abundant life (John 10:10) as long as these systems are in place. And while the struggles of the past have been incorporated in our Constitution, they have not been adequately incorporated into the public theology of our churches (West 2005a). This task too remains before us. The various liberation theologies that have emerged from our South African

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<sup>6</sup> Alistair Kee argues that Mosala's distinction between "the black working class" and the black "peasantry" (Mosala 1989:21), though Mosala himself does not develop this distinction, is crucial for Black Theology's task after liberation, because, says Kee, these different sectors live in different worlds, "characterised in turn by capitalism and feudalism". According to Kee, "The end of apartheid has been irrelevant to this fundamental division" (Kee 2006:94), a fundamental division that can only be addressed by dealing with "the question of land" (Kee 2006:95-97). Kee goes on in the pages cited to make a number of controversial statements about the task of Black Theology with respect to the black "peasantry", saying that "urban blacks" must "liberate them" and "redeem them" (Kee 2006:96).

context provide us with foundational resources and a clear trajectory for our present and future biblical and theological work.

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