AOSIS

'Selfishly backward' or 'selflessly forward?': A white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context

Author:
Alfred R. Brunsdon[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Alfred R. Brunsdon,
alfred.brunsdon@nwu.ac.za.

Depending on the *Sitz im Leben* of practical theologian, the issue of decolonisation will be a greater or lesser reality. For South Africans, decolonisation has become a part of their daily living. Decolonisation can be regarded as a second wave of liberation in the post-apartheid South Africa. Following on the first wave, or even the tsunami of transformation, is the urgent call for the decolonisation of colonial knowledge, structures and epistemologies that endured in the new dispensation. Squarely in the aim of decolonisation efforts are institutions of higher learning and by implication all disciplines taught there, including theology. The non-negotiability of the decolonisation of higher education is evident in the recurring violent protests and mass action, as expressed in different '#must-fall' campaigns over the last few years. This article argues that the current decolonisation drive in South Africa is urging local practical theologians to make an important choice, namely to move 'selfishly backward' or 'selflessly forward'. In other words, maintaining current practices or exploring alternatives in a new context. This choice is embedded in the reality that a significant number of practical theologians in South Africa are white males that may, from a decolonisation perspective, be deemed part of the colonisation legacy. Against this background, the article attempts to provide a reflective insider's perspective on a challenge and opportunity this creates for practical theology.

Keywords: Decolonisation; Practical Theology; South Africa; White male; Insider perspective; Ecology of knowledge.

Introduction

Decolonisation could be regarded as the second wave of liberation in post-apartheid South Africa. Following on the first wave of political transformation in the mid-1990s, the urgent call for decolonisation became apparent on many levels, such as the decolonisation of governance, history and symbols as well as the decolonisation of knowledge. Whereas the first two areas of decolonisation brought about many physical changes such as a government that is representative of the black majority and the removal of colonial names and symbols, it is the last and less visible area of the decolonisation of knowledge that remains an enduring source of frustration for many. Consequently, calls for the decolonisation of colonial knowledge and epistemologies are currently, still vehemently, sweeping the land. Such is the urgency of this call that academic institutions in South Africa have, over the last few years, been scarred by violent protests and recurring unrest that have sadly cost the lives of some students engaged with and dedicated to this cause.

The theme of decolonisation is thus not new for South African academics. The familiarity of the theme, however, makes it in no way simple to address. Colonisation is a highly complex matter per se about which there is little consensus in any regard (cf. Licata et al. 2018), except that it is one of the worst acts of human disregard on global scale (Mbembe 2016:104). In South Africa it is politically and historically polarised to the point that the very issue invokes emotions of frustration and anger. It is also a matter divided amongst racial lines in which white Europeans are seen as the root cause of the problem, although Oliver and Oliver (2017:2/8) remind of the fact that South Africa also fell victim to 'unofficial colonisation' by peoples from North Africa. Consequently, the biggest challenge for me is nestled on a very personal level, simply because of me being a white, middle-aged male academic, regarded by some as one of the remnants of colonialism. My writing and theorising on the matter may thus be looked upon by non-white colleagues as an anomaly, especially because I was not subjugated historically to the brunt of colonisation

Note: This article is published in the section Practical Theology of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa.

(cf. Lucket 2016:416). However, the goal of the research is not to voice or represent the African colonial experience in any way. Rather, as one of a substantial number of white theologians in South Africa, I seek to engage in critical reflection on decolonisation with a view to articulate possible responses to the challenges that still inhibit collective flourishing in post-colonial South Africa from a practical theological paradigm. Subsequently, the aim of this article is to ponder the way forward for practical theology in the South African context. The underlying thesis of this contemplation is that decolonisation challenges practical theologians to make a choice, namely, either to regress into – or sustaining a 'selfish' or old approach to doing practical theology – or to take the opportunity to lean towards a 'selfless' – or new approach to doing practical theology. It is argued that in this tension between a 'selfish' and a 'selfless' approach to doing practical theology lies the difference between taking the discipline 'forward' or forcing it 'backward' within the bigger framework of the decolonisation discourse in the South African context.

Conceptual framework and research method

Given the disposition of the researcher and the sensitive topic of the research, it is important to describe the conceptual framework that lies at the root of this article.

The title of this research alludes to a 'white male's insider perspective' on the theme at hand. An 'insider perspective' was chosen as a point of departure because of the personal nature of the account that is presented and its relation to the white male practical theology community from which it emanates. Generally speaking, insider perspective research is regarded as a qualitative approach where the researcher closely identifies with the 'culture' under investigation (Ross 2017:326). In the case of this article, the notion of a 'total insider' may be even more appropriate as no emotional or subjective detachment from the topic is assumed (Chavez 2008:475). In fact, the lived experiences of the researcher in a certain sense become the 'culture' under investigation. The vehicle for this 'total insider' approach can also be regarded as a form of self-reflexivity. The vulnerable nature of self-reflection and the fact that it can lay no claim to objectivity (Dreyer 2016:92) is embraced as beneficial to the theme, as the goal of the research is to function as a personal catalyst for a selfless approach to doing practical theology where the practitioner becomes intent on the context and free from the 'self'.

The tandem construct of 'white male' is applied in service of transparency and further recognition of my own vulnerability in the decolonial space. Given the need for brevity here, I forego elaborate discussions of either. I do, however, identify with Dreyer's (2016:97) observation that 'whiteness entails much more than the colour of my skin', it rather represents a worldview shaped by colonial thinking. This worldview can most simply be denoted as Eurocentric. Eurocentrism

generally regards the cultural and intellectual achievements of Europeans as the standard. According to Lewis (2017), it is used 'especially in reference to an educational curriculum that tends to disregard or minimize other traditions'. A worldview that favoured me reciprocally in many regards, simply because I was born white. The hybrid of colonial thinking that developed in a country like South Africa also favoured patriarchy and a male gender bias, which inevitably privileged males in all spheres of society. As for Beaudoin (2016:11), my whiteness is thus equally 'not separable' from my 'position as a man'. In specifying this reflection as a 'white male insider perspective', I am thus recognising my positionality in an attempt to deconstruct and resist its influence over my attempts of doing practical theology in a growing decolonial context.

The self-reflective activity engaged here is supported by literature to elucidate the researcher's experiences and understanding of the context from which these experiences emanated. The reflection aligns with the practical theological spirit of critical reflection on current practices in search for more appropriate theory for future practices in light of a Christian ethos that is serious about accountability and stewardship.

The ensuing reflection occurs within the parameters of at least the following coordinates, namely, the context for the reflection is created by describing the colonial essence of South Africa. Against this background remarks are made on colonialism and higher education as well as colonialism and practical theology. Thereafter I attempt to articulate the main challenge and opportunity this create for practical theologians in the current South African context, namely the challenge not to remain in a position of academic stagnation (selfishly backward), but rather to embrace the opportunity decolonisation creates – to move selflessly forward through an epistemological openness and a new focus on the emerging and changing context.

The colonial essence of Southern Africa

In creating a context for this contribution within a wider audience, it is imperative to partially engage the historical narrative of what has currently become known as the 'new' South Africa or 'rainbow nation'.[1] Historically, South Africa's very being can be understood against the background of the colonial efforts of Europe during the 17th century. Before the arrival of the Dutch in 1652, the Khoikhoi and San were the oldest known inhabitants of the land. Other ethnic groups who claim ancient rights include the Sotho, Tswana, Bantu and Zulus (Paas 2016:305). With the arrival of the Dutch Settlers in the Cape, Africans and Europeans were brought

[1].The term 'rainbow nation' is attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu who used it to denote the new democracy of South Africa after the first democratic elections that took place in 1994 (Buqa 2015:1). It was an attempt to give expression to the unified identity of four different ethnic groups that converged into one nation with the dawn of new democracy. The term was endorsed by late president Nelson Mandela when he applied this metaphor to South Africa in his inaugural speech on 10 May 1994 in Pretoria that has since been received with mixed affinities by South Africans of different ethnicities.

into a perennial contest of the available land and resources. Over the following centuries, more settlers would come to inhabit this land, including French, Portuguese – but most notably – English settlers, each with their own agenda, culture, values and knowledge frameworks. The English presence is singled out, as they, more than others, had a specific imperialistic agenda – an agenda that was forcibly applied before and during periods of British rule through military action and legislation. The Eurocentric attitude that came with all these foreign settlers gave the Southern tip of Africa its colonial essence – devoid of its original African character. The late Willem Saayman described the spirit of the colonisers in terms of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism alludes to the 'hostile views' towards African aboriginals that were rooted in the stereotypes that Europeans nurtured about non-Europeans, even before invading the African continent (Saayman 2007:20–21). A further, unfortunate marriage between European perceptions of 'civilisation' and 'Christianity' morally legitimised Western superiority that became one of the deeply engrained traits of colonialism experienced in South Africa. This immediately led to the caste system which characterised the colonial era, where the dominant caste was white and the lowest caste black (Saayman 2007:21). With the evolution of a new nation that became known as the 'Afrikaners', the descendants of the original settlers carried forth this spirit of ethnocentrism which culminated in the social engineering project of apartheid that arguably became the ideological trademark of the 'old' South Africa and cemented the true colonial nature of the land. Within the parameters of this particular article, I suggest three tenets of this essence that I deem key to the argument presented here.

The colonial essence of South Africa is, to my mind, to be sought on at least three levels, namely a spiritual-psychological, physical and intellectual level. The Euro-ethnocentrism that accompanied the colonisation of the African South first and foremost had spiritual and psychological effects in so far as Tomicic and Berardi (2017:155) underline the psychological impact of colonialism as the 'wholesale degradation' of the natives of the land. The *mission civilisatrice* [civilising mission] of the West inevitably rested on presumptions regarding the 'cultural backwardness' of the global South and a perceived moral duty to civilise the world (Gbedoah 2018:6, 9). This 'wholesale degradation' included the cultural and religious affinities of locals. On a physical level the governance of colonised regions comes to mind, as colonial efforts brought along new governance and the loss of political independence. In whatever form colonialism appeared, whether it was settler, commercial or civilizing in nature, tangible changes came into the daily lives of the colonised because of the 'objectionable form of political relation' that characterised colonial rule and left little or no room for 'equality and reciprocity in decision-making' (Ypi 2013:162–163). Lastly, and most important to the focus of this article, is the intellectual losses that were incurred by colonial verve that determined the true essence of colonialism. Broadly referred to as the colonisation of the

mind, the colonial project had implications for local knowledge and ways of knowing. It essentially meant that imperialists deemed their own knowledge and the epistemologies from which it was born as superior to all forms of local knowledge. At the same time, colonisation of the mind offered a non-violent way of teaching the colonised to become the mirror image of the coloniser. In this process both subtle and less subtle approaches were used to transfer the knowledge of the coloniser to the colonised. Subtle methods included convincing someone of the inferiority of their own culture and knowledge, and less subtle approaches included formally educating the colonised with the coloniser's knowledge (Kgatla 2018:148). Applied diligently over a long period of time, the colonised became 'foreigners and strangers' to their own cultures and ways of knowing (Shongwe 2016:1). In the case of Southern Africa, this colonisation of the mind meant dislocating Africans from their 'materio-spirituality-centred ways of knowing' (Kaunda 2015:74) and resulted in a country that currently has a vast majority of Africans, but with only a small indigenous knowledge footprint. It is this enduring colonial essence and heritage of South Africa that is fuelling the current decolonisation campaign in higher learning.

Colonialism and higher education in South Africa

The history of higher education in South Africa is intrinsically linked to its colonial heritage. Subsequently, the initial institution of universities is regarded by some as a mere extension of the colonial project that viewed universities as the 'local representatives of universal knowledge' (Heleta 2016:2–8) – embodying a form of 'epistemic violence' since their inception. Throughout South African history this epistemic one-sidedness was engrained at all levels of education and reached its climax during the apartheid era. At the inception of the apartheid era legislation was passed that led to acts that even governed primary schooling, such as the *Bantu Education Act* of 1953, which was primarily aimed at the segregation of ethnic groups, but also led to a segregation of curricula that resulted to inequality in terms of content and quality. Although these curricula were Western orientated, apartheid tuition now also meant that black children would receive a lesser education 'not … worthy of the name' (Saayman 2007:88). Whilst the transformation to a new democracy eradicated these draconic acts of social and educative engineering, the primacy of Western epistemologies in higher education endures. It is this claim that led to the orchestrated and deliberate onset of the decolonisation campaign in higher education that literally lit up university campuses across South Africa since 2015. The so-called '#must-fall' movement initially arose with an aim to dismantle the enduring 'domination by white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews in higher education' (Heleta 2016:1–8). As the '#must-fall' movement since evolved, it seems that many issues regarding student agency were added to the original decolonising agenda, such as the inclusion of free

food and lodging. What, however, became clear is that higher education in South Africa finds itself at an intersection where academics need to take personal inventory of their epistemic orientation and need to embark on an academic path that is mindful of the needs and true challenges of the real current context.

Colonialism and practical theology in South Africa

As I chose to present a reflective account on the theme at hand, I also offer a few observations on colonialism and practical theology in South Africa as I experienced it during my theological training and academic career.

I received my initial theological training from 1986 to 1991 at two different public universities during the apartheid era. I have completed a *Baccalaureus Artium* (BA) with Theology majors at the then University of Port Elizabeth, currently the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. This was followed by a *Baccalaureus Theologiae* (BTh) degree at the then University of the Orange Free State, now the University of the Free State, as this was the minimum requirement for ordination as minister in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) at the time. It is important, for the sake of an international audience, to note that the DRC was historically regarded as a main stream South African Church of the Reformed tradition and also the denomination associated with and theologically affirming the apartheid government's policy of racial segregation. Such was the mutual affinity between the National Party Government of the time and the DRC that the DRC was anecdotally known in some circles as the 'National Party in prayer'.

The start of my theological studies (1986), however, coincided with the year that the DRC synod revisited its stance on racial segregation and declared apartheid theologically unfounded. To this effect the DRC synod published the document *Kerk en Samelewing* [Church and Society] in which membership of the DRC was declared 'open' for all races and the Biblical justification of *apartheid* rejected officially (Brunsdon 2015:356). In another significant but gender-related issue, the national synod of the DRC of 1990 also decided that females may become ordained ministers. My years of initial formal training have thus coincided with turbulent years in the history of the church I was destined to minister. It was also intensely turbulent political period for South Africa, as it was during this time that Nelson Mandela was released from prison (11 February 1990) and the African National Congress, together with other previously banned parties such as the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), were unbanned. Even though South Africa stood on the brink of radical changes, not a single aspect of these immanent changes resonated in the curriculum I was taught. Not so much as a formal class discussion attempted to engage the context that was set to change in every conceivable way.

As for practical theology, my first experience with it as a theological discipline was reserved for my B.Th. studies. Still in possession of the very textbook from which I received tuition, Introduction to Theology (Eybers, König & Stoop 1978), practical theology was introduced as the newcomer to the theological encyclopaedia. In an extensive overview by Wolfaardt (1978:268–285), it transpired that this discipline draws on insights from Europe, England and the United States and that it was focused on the faith actions of the believers within faith contexts. My challenge as a student, preparing to become a minister in South Africa, was to apply these Western insights in the fields of pastoral care, homiletics and liturgy in a new and evolving society. Upon returning to the University of the Free State – after 7 years of full-time ministry in two different congregations – to pursue a Master's and later a Doctoral degree in the field of Pastoral Care – I found the discipline firmly caught in the grips of the postmodern debate; how it spread from Europe and its potential influence on South Africa.

The point to be taken from all of this is verbalising the 'not so obvious' – that which the public universities where I have studied have been silent on – namely the local (African) context and any knowledge that may have resided there. During the time of my studies I was firmly aware that black students received theological training elsewhere, where they obtained diplomas in Theology rather than degrees. I knew this, as white congregations such as my own supported black theological colleges financially. What was the content of those curricula I had no knowledge of, but it paid testimony to the existence of local knowledge – or local theology, if you will, through which these students were prepared for ministry.

A more intimate knowledge of theological curricula would follow upon my appointment as associate professor at a public university in 2012. I started to teach mainly African students enrolled from pre-graduate to PhD level at the Mafikeng campus of the North-West University, an amalgamated institution between three different universities. Here I discovered that the curriculum content was purely Western, although it was used to train African students preparing themselves for ministry aimed at African contexts. A critical analysis of the practical theological content of the curriculum yielded the same – namely that a Western paradigm served as basis for the curriculum of training African students (cf. Brunsdon & Knoetze 2014). At that time South Africa was nearly two decades into its new democracy, and transformation, reportedly, occurred on all levels of the society, placing the field of higher education under suspicion of not being able to transform to an epistemic position more representative of the population.

Since then, these suspicions were verbalised by a growing number of South African academics (Pillay 2015; Ramoupi 2014; Venter 2015, 2016) and a progressively disgruntled student population, as seen in recurring student protests, calling on university management to 'call out the ghost of

coloniality' (Lucket 2016:416). In some instances, the criticism was harsh, as the accusation was made that South Africa remained academically trapped in a Eurocentric and colonial paradigm (Heleta 2016):

> Two decades after the end of apartheid, the curriculum at South African universities is still largely Eurocentric, rooted in the colonial and apartheid dispossession, looting and humiliation of Africa and its people. (p. 3)

A challenge and opportunity for practical theology in the South African context

If the statement of Heleta (2016) at the end of the previous section is taken as representative of the experience of the black academic collective in South Africa, white academics find themselves in a precarious disposition in the current decolonisation discourse. Especially if 'dispossession, looting and humiliation of Africa and its people' (Heleta 2016:3–8) are understood to have occurred at the hands of white colonisers, it is understandable that a deep distrust towards whites exists and that whiteness itself has become a negative link and sorrowful association with an inhumane past. Unfortunately, the recent history of the New South Africa has carried out nothing to improve the perceptions different ethnic groups harbour of one another. Nor has it performed anything to improve the relationship between blacks and whites, and for that matter, between any of the four main ethnic groups in South Africa, which include Asian and mixed race people.

In a research project on collective identity formation, shortly after the first violent protests of the '#must-fall' campaigns ensued, I pointed out that the initial euphoria of a unified new nation made way for a divided and fragmented society (Brunsdon 2017:5, 7). The vision of unity, so diligently nurtured by the late Nelson Mandela, was abruptly replaced by a new sense of African nationalism that effectively derailed the 'Rainbow project' aimed at unifying the democratic South African society through, amongst others, popular culture, reconciliation projects and political and economic transformation, which included new laws to eradicate all forms of discrimination and introduced black economic empowerment (cf. Horáková 2011). Instead, the race-based fault line that created the 'old South-Africa' seemed to be reincarnated in the racial nationalist ideas of new leaders, such as Nelson Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki. In this regard Horáková (2011:115) points out that Mbeki's 'I am African' address, which accompanied the adoption of the new constitution in 1996 and the 'South Africa: two nations' address in 1998, effectively changed the collective identity agenda from Rainbowism to Africanism. This resulted in the notion of a 'white threat' (Johnson 2009:59) as well as that of 'poor blacks' and 'rich whites' sowing new seeds of distrust along racial lines. This racial divide still resonates in the way South Africans continue to 'misconstrue' the identities of the 'other' based on historic perceptions and

supported by a lack of shared experiences such as ethnic origin, history, language and beliefs that are some of the key elements in terms of a unified collective identity (Brunsdon 2017:4, 7). It also gave rise to a new form of black nationalism amongst young Africans, resulting in the emergence of new political groupings such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the Black First Land First movement (BLF) which became known for their liberation politics and inflammatory statements about white people, propagating the idea that current political challenges are solely the result of the colonial past.

Nearly a quarter of a century into democracy, the sense of unity in South Africa is thus still dire. In March 2016, the South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR) released their, ironically named, 'Reasons for Hope' report that stated the following (SAIRR 2016):

> Much of the debate this year has been hostile and polarising. Social media, in particular, have spoken of an 'unbridgeable gap' that has developed between black and white South Africans. South Africans were said to have 'no interest in reconciliation, redress, and nation building'. (p. 1)

It is this climate of 'acrimonious and robust disharmony' (cf. Msimang 2015) that invokes a growing personal tension that I as a white male academic – and relic of a colonial past -- may not be welcome at the table of decolonial discourse and that any contribution from a white perspective may be disqualified as an attempt to sustain the legacy of Western hegemony or at best be viewed with suspicion. Herein, to my mind, lies the biggest challenge for practical theology in the current South African context, namely not to become frozen within the old paradigm, because a real resistance has developed against previous and current practices with which I am closely associated. Put somewhat differently, not to remain selfishly where I am, by nurturing and protecting my Western practical theological identity by simply 'carrying on' with a Eurocentric practical theological orientation, as this may take the discipline 'backward' by keeping it in the past.

At the same time, embedded in this challenge lies the biggest opportunity for practical theology in the current South African context, namely to move forward by becoming 'selfless'. Becoming 'selfless' in this context refers to thinking wider than my Western practical theological identity, despite any perceived antagonism and to fully engage the context of which I am a part. To this end I must purposefully choose to make a contribution to the decolonisation discourse with a view of resolving the conflicts that are governing my troubled context. The question is, however, how and on what grounds will I be able to do so?

I can think of at least three grounds for such a contribution, namely the pressing contextual reality in which I find myself, the Christian nature of practical theology, and because of the ecological nature of knowledge. The pressing contextual reality of the new South Africa compels me to contribute to the decolonisation discourse for two reasons. First is the

multi-cultural reality that is the new South Africa, and the second reason is that its new constitution provides an equal voice to all, including voices from minority groups of which I became a part. The mere fact that I still have a position at a public university provides me with both responsibility and academic agency from which I cannot shy away simply because of my whiteness or because I perceive that others may be suspicious of my motives. On another level, the contextual reality of South Africa is one of a country torn at its very seams. South Africa seems to have fallen upon a path of self-destructive governance, lawlessness and a failing economy that has thrown South Africans into a state of severe vulnerability and insecurity. To highlight only one aspect of the current South African condition, one can refer to the issue of security after the dawn of the new democracy. In this regard the crime and violence rate in South Africa has risen to some of the highest in the world (Staff Writer 2017; Statistics South Africa [StatsSA] 2017). Even more disturbing is that much of the recorded violence is against women and children, accentuating a deep-rooted dysfunctionality in large parts of the society (StatsSA 2018). When the alarming growth of state corruption, unemployment, poverty and xenophobia towards refugees from neighbouring countries are added, the serious nature of moral decay becomes apparent. A sad state of affairs strikingly is described in the words of the South African poet Louis Esterhuysen. On the question how it currently is to live in South Africa, Esterhuyzen apparently answered: 'Alarming and frightening, terrible and frightening, estranging and dividing' (Louw 2017:124). South Africa has thus become a country that is in need of positive transformation, seeking every positive and constructive voice to aid such cause, and therefore I, as a practical theologian, am obliged to contribute to the healing of the land.

The second ground for my own contribution to the decolonisation discourse relies on the Christian nature of practical theology. As a sub-discipline of theology, I believe that practical theology resembles a welcoming and forgiving space where all of God's creatures are welcome at the table of reflection, as the focus is on critical reflection in the light of the scriptures and the Christian ethos. Here I am welcomed not because of my ethnic orientation or my cultural heritage, but because I share the Christian faith with a faith community in a global village, all yearning for and working towards Christian practice that is faithful to the mission of God in a broken world (cf. Swinton & Mowat 2016:7).

Thirdly, I also feel compelled to contribute to the decolonisation discourse in the light of the notion that knowledge itself bears an ecological nature. In this regard I lean on the notion of Santos' 'ecologies of knowledges' (2007). In response to Western knowledge as 'abyssal thinking' (Santos 2007:45), which was responsible for the wide spread 'epistimicide' of non-Western knowledge during the colonial era, Santos (2016:18) propagates the notion of the 'ecologies of knowledges'. It is an epistemological stance that denies 'abyssal knowledge', but recognises that knowledge is essentially 'inter-knowledge'. Hence, post-abyssal thinking understands knowledge as an 'ecology', as it is 'based upon the recognition of the plurality of heterogeneous knowledges and on the sustained and dynamic interactions between them without compromising their autonomy' (Santos 2007:66). As a practical theologian schooled in a Western paradigm and as someone who has practised practical theology oblivious of other paradigms, it means that I must start to interact with epistemologies other than the one I know, whilst at the same time my own knowledge and paradigm retain a seat at the table. In this paradigm, decolonisation is not a renunciation of one epistemology in favour of the other, but entering into a dynamic and interactive relationship where the abyssal dividing line fades. It is on these grounds that I feel I can – and must – take a place at the table of decolonisation.

Selflessly forward

When taking a place at the table of decolonisation in the current South African context, what would be my agenda, or simply, my proposal? In light of the afore-going reflection, my proposal is that practical theologians should take on the challenge that the decolonisation project brings, namely to progress forward in a selfless fashion.

In my own context this relates closely with Santos' thinking on Western knowledge as abyssal thinking that created abyssal lines between Western and other forms of knowledge, where knowledge on the 'other side' of the line simply did not exist or matter. 'The division is such that the other side of the line vanishes as reality, becomes non-existent' (Santos 2007:45). My own training and practice in the field of practical theology, which I narrated earlier, ascribed to this type of thinking. Even though I was not 'against' any other epistemology or knowledge – or did in no way attempt to discredit it – simply being oblivious of it worked towards deepening the abyssal line between my (Western) knowledge and other knowledge of practical theology. By making other knowledge non-existent is this way, I became academically selfish. In my own case, this approach aligned with the colonial spirit of South Africa, exacerbated by apartheid. Becoming selfless would then at least entail widening my knowledge horizons in the new context of democracy and multicultural coexistence, not being oblivious of the other by recognising the 'dynamic interactions' between epistemologies. This, according to Santos (2007), resembles post-abyssal thinking – or seeing knowledge as an ecology, which rests on the following three conditions:

- Radical co-presence: Practices and agents on both sides of the lines are contemporary in equal terms.
- The inexhaustible diversity of world experience: The recognition of a plurality of knowledges beyond scientific knowledge.
- Knowledges and ignorances: The utopia of inter-knowledge is learning other knowledges without forgetting one's own (Santos 2007:66–69).

For me, the journey of becoming selfless has become somewhat of an organic process when I started to teach full time in an African context. There I came under the impression of the insufficiency of the Western paradigm for a contemporary multi-cultural, but mainly African, context that the new South Africa has become (cf. Lartey 2013). Consequently, I have since embarked on an academic journey where I am contemplating the most responsible way of decolonising practical theology. On this journey, I have sensed that one can go about the task of decolonisation in many ways, amongst others in a retributive way or a romantic way. In a retributive approach it is about breaking down the past and getting rid of all that is associated with the past with anger and a spirit of vengeance as we have seen repeatedly during the '#must-fall' campaigns. In a romantic approach it is about restoring some romantic ideal of Africa, a continent of *Ubuntu* and what could have been was it not for Europe or globalisation. My suggestion is that we could, and should rather go about this task in a restorative way. In other words, to restore what has been suppressed and ignored in the past and to communally reincarnate it to the benefit of a radically changed context. The challenge of restorative decolonisation lies in Santos' (2007) condition of embracing knowledge as an ecology. To embrace practical theological knowledge as an ecology would imply reaching out to my African brothers and sisters as contemporary partners, recognising African beliefs and practices as forms of knowledge that transcend mere scientific boundaries and respect the intersection between knowledge and ignorance, by not unlearning what I know but learning from others which I am yet to know. Restorative decolonisation will ultimately have implications for curriculum development in the field of practical theology. Such curriculum development has to be critically sensitive about the many ways that Western epistemologies are resilient in education (cf. Nyamnjoh 2012) in order to not merely reincarnate colonial knowledge under a neo-colonial guise (Bulhan 2015:243). Rather, they should reflect local knowledge to address current contextual realities.

Conclusion

The proposal of this article is that the current challenge of decolonisation in a plural and multicultural context can be met by moving selflessly forward by becoming epistemologically open-minded. It is however not just for those, like myself, who are as a result of their heritage, associated with a colonial past and hence obliged to become involved in decolonisation, but it is a call for all stakeholders caught in the current fragmented society. It is therefore not a call to re-colonise to the other side because that will just devise new abyssal thinking and creating new abyssal lines. The call here is for all to look away from ourselves and focus on the context at hand. It is a plea for the contextualisation of practical theology where we focus on prevailing contexts and offer all of our different epistemologies to the benefit of the current context. This approach is not, in the first place, concerned with culture or the eradication of some form of political-historical deficit, but with making theology itself relevant within a certain context. In this approach the collective 'we' assume a position of stewardship as well as ownership of the context in which we find ourselves. An approach where we do not hold the 'other' accountable for the 'sins of the fathers', as the present and future require something new from us. It is indeed no simple call, but given the brokenness of what we have become, a worthwhile cause.

References

Beaudoin, T., 2016, 'Why does practice matter theologically?', in J.A. Mercer & B.J. Miller-McLemore (eds.), *Conundrums in practical theology*, pp. 8–32, Brill, Leiden, the Netherlands.

Brunsdon, A.R., 2015, 'The limited public good of a confession. A public theological reflection on enhancing the (public) good of the Belhar Confession in the Reformed Church family of South Africa', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1(2), 345–365. http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2015.v1n2.a16

Brunsdon, A.R., 2017, '#Misconstrued Identities MustFall. Collective identity formation in the current South African context: A practical theological perspective', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(2), a4888. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i2.4888

Brunsdon, A.R. & Knoetze, J.J., 2014, 'Batho Pele (people first): Some ethical and contextual reflections on theological training in an African context', in M.A. Mokoena & I. Oosthuizen (eds.), *Nuances of teaching learning and research: Research and publication book series*, vol. 3, pp. 261–280, Andcorck, Potchefstroom.

Bulhan, H.A., 2015, 'Stages of colonialism in Africa: From occupation of land to occupation of being', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3(1), 239–256. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v3i1.143

Buqa, W., 2015, 'Storying Ubuntu as a rainbow nation', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(2), Art. #1434, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i2.1434

Chavez, C., 2008, 'Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality', *The Qualitative Report* 13(3), 474–494. https://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-3/chavez.pdf.

Dreyer, J.S., 2016, 'Knowledge, subjectivity, (de)coloniality, and the conundrum of reflexivity', in J.A. Mercer & B.J. Miller-McLemore (eds.), *Conundrums in practical theology*, pp. 90–109, Brill, Leiden, the Netherlands.

Eybers, I.H., König, A. & Stoop, J.A. (eds.), 1978, *Introduction to theology*, 2nd edn., National Book Printers, Goodwood, Cape Town, South Africa.

Gbedoah, R., 2018, 'On colonialism and development: Why the underdevelopment of the South cannot be delinked from the experience of the past', *African Journal of Governance and Development* 7(1), 6–16.

Heleta, S., 2016, 'Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa', *Transformation in Higher Education* 1(1), a9. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9

Horáková, H., 2011, 'Non-racialism and nation-building in the new South Africa', *ALPPI Annual of Language & Politics and Politics of Identity* V, 109–123.

Johnson, R.W., 2009, *South Africa´s brave new world*, Penguin Books, London.

Kaunda, C.J., 2015, 'The denial of African agency: A decolonial theological turn', *Black Theology* 13(1), 73–92. https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000048

Kgatla, S.T., 2018, 'The decolonisation of the mind. Black consciousness community projects by the Limpopo council of churches', *Missionalia* 46(1), 146–162. https://doi.org/10.7832/46-1-270

Lartey, E.Y., 2013, *Postcolonializing God: An African practical theology*, SCM Press, London.

Lewis, T.T., 2017, *Eurocentrism*, p. 1, Salem Press Encyclopedia, Amenia, New York, NY.

Licata, L., Khan, S.S., Lastrego, S., Cabecinhas, R, Valentim, J.P. & Liu, J.H., 2018, 'Social representations of colonialism in Africa and in Europe: Structure and relevance for contemporary intergroup relations', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 62, 68–79. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.05.004

Louw, D.J., 2017, 'Xenophobia and social prejudice through the lens of Calvin: From "iron philosophy" to *homo sympatheticus* in a practical theology of home within the global dilemma of displaced refugees', in S.P. van der Walt & N. Vorster (eds.), pp. 123–138, *Reformed theology today: Practical-theological, missiological and ethical perspectives*, AOSIS, Cape Town, South Africa. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2017.rtt47.08

Lucket, K., 2016, 'Curriculum contestation in a post-colonial context: A view from the South', *Teaching in Higher Education* 21(4), 415–428. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1155547

Mbembe, A., 2016, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, Editions La Découverte, Paris, France.

Msimang, S., 2015, 'The end of the rainbow nation myth', *New York Times*, 12 April, viewed 01 March 2019, from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/13/opinion/the-end-of-the-rainbow-nation-myth.html?_r=0.

Nyamnjoh, F.B., 2012, '"Potted plants in greenhouses": A critical reflection on the resilience of colonial education in Africa', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47(2), 129–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909611417240

Oliver, E. & Oliver, W.H., 2017, 'The colonisation of South Africa: A unique case', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), a4498. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4498

Paas, S., 2016, *Christianity in Eurafrica. A history of the church in Europe and Africa*, Christian Lecture Fund, Wellington, New Zealand.

Pillay, S., 2015, 'Decolonising the university', *Africa is a Country*, viewed 08 March 2019, from https://africasacountry.com/2015/06/decolonizing-the-university/.

Ramoupi, N.L.L., 2014, 'African research and scholarship: 20 years of lost opportunities to transform higher education in South Africa', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 38(1), 269–286.

Ross, L.E., 2017, 'An account from the inside: Examining the emotional impact of qualitative research through the lens of "insider" research', *Qualitative Psychology* 4(3), 326–337. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000064

Saayman, W., 2007, *Being missionary – Being human: An overview of Dutch reformed mission*, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

Santos, B., 2007, 'Beyond abyssal thinking. From global lines to ecologies of knowledges', *Review* XXX(1), 45–89.

Santos, B., 2016, 'Epistemologies of the South and the future', *From the European South* 1, 17–29, viewed on 11 February 2019, from https://europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it.

Shongwe, B.M., 2016, 'Decolonising the mind and restoring the dignity of black people', *News24*, viewed 04 March 2018, from https://www.news24.com/MyNews24/decolonising-the-mind-andrestoringthe-dignity-of-b

South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR), 2016, *Reasons for hope*, SAIRR, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Staff Writer, 2017, 'South Africa rates amongst the most dangerous countries in the world – and it's costing us', *Business Tech*, 21 September, viewed 01 September 2018, from https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/200044/south-africa-ranks-among-the-most-dangerous-countries-in-the-world-and-its-costing-us/.

Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), 2017, *Victims of crime survey*, StatsSA, Pretoria, South Africa.

Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), 2018, 'Crime against women in South Africa', Report No. 03-40-05, StatsSA, Pretoria, South Africa.

Swinton, J. & Mowat, H., 2016, *Practical theology and qualitative research*, SCM Press, London.

Tomicic, A. & Berardi, F., 2017, 'Between past and present: The socio-psychological constructs of colonialism, coloniality and postcolonialism', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 52(1), 152–175. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-017-9407-5

Venter, R., 2015, 'Transformation, theology and the public university in South Africa', *Acta Theologica* 35(2), 173–203. https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i2.11

Venter, R., 2016, 'Theology and the (post-)apartheid university: Mapping discourses, interrogating transformation', *Transformation in Higher Education* 1(1), a5. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.5

Wolfaardt, J.A., 1978, 'Practical theology', in I.H. Eybers, A. König & J.A. Stoop (eds.), *Introduction to theology*, 2nd edn., pp. 268–284, National Book Printers, Goodwood, Cape Town, South Africa.

Ypi, L., 2013, 'What's wrong with colonialism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 41(2), 158–191. https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12014