


White responses to Black Theology: Revisiting a typology

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This article reflects on a threefold typology of white responses to Black Theology (rejection-sympathy-solidarity) which I used in my doctoral thesis (1988). This article, which is dedicated to the memory of Vuyani Vellem, shows how the typology was used by him in a publication. It then points out a number of inadequacies in the typology and places it in a framework of encounters between the praxis of a Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) and a liberating white praxis (LWP). It uses a seven-dimensional 'praxis matrix' to explore such encounters, which happen along with an encounter with the praxis of the poor and the praxis of God. Since a typology of white praxes remains useful, an expanded six-fold typology is suggested to replace the previous one.

Contribution: The contribution of this article is to deepen reflection on the dynamics of interaction between white theologians and a BTL.

Keywords: Black Theology; white theology; praxis matrix; encounterology; conversion; orthopathy.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to honour the memory of the late Professor Vuyani Vellem, and to show my deep appreciation for his contribution to my life and theology. It responds to an article by Vellem (2017), in which he used a threefold typology of white responses to Black Theology that I had developed in my doctoral thesis (Kritzinger 1988). After briefly explaining the typology, I point out its weaknesses and develop a more adequate framework for transformative encounters between white and black theologians¹ in South Africa. This is an exercise in encounterology (Kritzinger 2008) – an exploration of transformative encounters – which unfolds in dialogue with a number of publications of Vuyani Vellem, especially Vellem (2017), in which he referred to my typology. While writing this article I came across the article of a young colleague, Kobe (2021), in which she referred to the way Vellem (2017) used my typology. I differ from her interpretation of Vellem's article, as will become clear during the course of this article, but her comments made me realise the inadequacies of the threefold typology and thereby contributed to the shape of this article.

A typology of white responses to Black Theology

The three types of white response to Black Theology that I constructed in my doctoral thesis were rejection, sympathy and solidarity. After giving some examples of rejection and sympathy (Kritzinger 1988:259–267), I developed my own solidarity position, which I called a 'liberating white Christianity' (Kritzinger 1988:268–334). Before explaining this typology, I need to explain the background to its creation.

The inclusion of a section on white liberation in my thesis was because of an encounter with a black colleague, Mpho Ntoane,² in the Netherlands in 1986.³ While discussing my research on Black Theology, he asked me whether I was giving the same attention to my own white history and identity as I was giving to the struggle of black Christians with their black history and identity. His question made me realise that my approach was in a way 'voyeuristic', like a fly on

1. I use the lower case for black and white, but capitals for Black Theology, as a technical term.

2. He was a South African church minister who went to the Netherlands to do a doctorate in theology, married a Dutch woman and worked in an anti-racism programme in Rotterdam.

3. I wrote about this encounter before (Kritzinger 2001:247) and the present paragraph is based on that.

Note: Special Collection: VukaniBantuTsohangBatho: Spirituality of Black Liberation, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo (University of South Africa) and Rothney Tshaka (University of South Africa).

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the wall, observing without being observed.⁴ I was exploring the struggles of black Christians to make sense of *being black and Christian* in a racist society, without struggling with the same intensity – in my thesis – to make sense of *being white and Christian* in that racist society. I decided to take up that challenge and decided to add a chapter on white responses to Black Theology, and to make clear that my whole study was a particular type of white response to it. The methodological conversion triggered by that encounter led me to declare my agency at the beginning of the thesis: ‘This is a consciously *white* proposal for a liberating missiology, which unfolds in *dialogue* with Black Theology’ (Kritzinger 1988:2, italics in original).

To distinguish my view from other white responses – and to critique them as inadequate responses to racism, I characterised them as rejection and sympathy, respectively. The *rejection* response viewed Black Theology as:

[A] radical reduction and falsification of the biblical gospel. It can perhaps even be described as a shallow, Marxist and optimistic anthropology with a few theology-sounding comments added in the margins. (Pont 1973:26, my translation)

A secular and political theology that tempts young Blacks to embrace Marxism and encourages violence. (Crafford 1987:28, my translation)

A theology of black domination fed by the twin sources of the Social Gospel and black racism. (*Woord en Daad* 1972:7, my translation)

Nothing more than Black power in religious dress. It is an instrument in the hand of political activists who use religion and churches to foment revolution. (Strauss 1984:34, my translation)

According to Boshoff (1973:5), a wholesale acceptance of Black Theology by black people would ‘permanently destroy any possibility of communication between white and black’. Much emphasis was placed on the fact that Black Theology was introduced to South Africa by Basil Moore, a white Methodist minister employed by the University Christian Movement (UCM), which not only tainted Black Theology as a ‘foreign import’, but also painted it as part of an international onslaught on South Africa by the ‘communist-controlled’ World Council of Churches (see Kritzinger 1988:261).

The *sympathy* response cannot be neatly distinguished from the previous one, since some theologians moved from one to the other with time or made statements at different times that fit in both approaches. This approach judged that Black Theology made some valid points and that its rejection of white racism was valid, but that it was one-sided and in danger of becoming ‘merely a handmaiden of an ideological struggle’ (see Kritzinger 1988:265). Whereas the rejection response was driven by hostility, the sympathy response exhibited sometimes a chastened humility, at other times a condescending paternalism, suggesting that black theologians should rather develop an ‘indigenous’ and

4.Katongole (2011:136) writes perceptively about how Jesus posed the same challenge to Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–11): ‘He had to sacrifice the clear vision that being up on a tree provided and the ‘power’ that that vantage point accorded him: the power of clear sight, the power of seeing without being seen – a panopticon – which is the real meaning of power, of touching without being touched’.

‘healthy’ *African* theology instead of being drawn into ‘a racist and nationalist theology that could eventually overpower the gospel’ (Crafford 1973:46, my translation).

The *solidarity* response that I developed in my thesis and subsequent publications can be briefly summarised as a posture of deep listening, which ‘affirms the liberatory thrust of Black Theology and attempts to develop a *complementary* liberating ministry in the white community’ (Kritzinger 1988:268, italics in original). Reversing the white colonial gaze, the study ‘proceeds along the road of becoming exposed and vulnerable to the gaze of black people, in an attempt to facilitate a real meeting between the two worlds’ (Kritzinger 1988:11), and to express solidarity with what black Christian intellectuals are doing for the liberation of the whole society. A number of white South African theologians have adopted this position, starting with Beyers Naudé (see van Wyngaard 2019:185–208), Randall (1973) and the ‘Liberating Ministry to the White Community’ project of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), among others (see van Wyngaard 2016, 2019:183f.).

The use of the typology by Vuyani Vellem

In order to honour my late colleague, Vuyani Vellem, I look at how he used my threefold typology in his article entitled ‘Unthinking the West: The spirit of doing Black Theology of Liberation in decolonial times’ (Vellem 2017). He used it to illustrate the continuing coloniality of South African (and global) society and to define what a Black Theology of Liberation BTL needs to ‘un-think’ in these decolonial times. He used the typology to characterise white attitudes in the contemporary context of global neofascism and ongoing ‘racist epiphanies’ in South Africa. He also affirmed my proposal of a white liberation theology and the conversion required for that to take shape. He concluded his discussion of my ideas with the words:

Enough with our *inspiration* from Kritzinger, save to say that in 2016, he repeated the same thesis in his response to the plague of racist epiphanies in South Africa at the commemoration of the Sharpeville Massacre. Re-reading the thoughts regarding BTL in 1988 is no different in 2017 and that is *tragic*. (Vellem 2017:5, italics added)

So while on the one hand he regarded my ideas as a source of inspiration, on the other hand he found it tragic that it was necessary for me to repeat the core notions of my thesis almost 30 years later – and that those ideas were still relevant and necessary.⁵

He used my threefold typology as an illustration of the choices that are made by ‘the West’ to respond to BTL’s ‘strong thought’, which are discernible even in post-1994 South Africa. Summarising his survey of the three types of white responses, he wrote:

5.Vellem (2017:5) was referring to the speech that I presented at a Sharpeville commemoration rally (Kritzinger 2016), in which I reiterated my views on a liberating white Christianity, but without mentioning the typology.

The ideas of BTL, its independence, are *rejected* in sophisticated ways in post-1994 South Africa or co-opted (*sympathised* with), with very little expressions of *solidarity* with the strong thoughts of this paradigm. On the contrary, the fascist defence of privilege accrued from a *longue durée* of black brokenness is the dominant response. (Vellem 2017:5, italics added)

In other words, he agreed that the typology reflected white (Western) approaches to BTL, but he singled out the ‘sympathy’ response, which he regarded as:

[P]robably one of the most vexatious expressions of the supremacy and superiority of white responses in our view. It is the most dangerous, obviously for reasons of patronage and excessive vituperation by a white supremacist in what appears a benign façade, albeit a mocking laughter of an abusive attitude towards black pain. (Vellem 2017:4f.)

This rejection of condescending and patronising white responses to black suffering is a continuation of the rejection of ‘white liberals’ by Biko (1978) and the Black Consciousness movement at large. He followed that up with a statement that can be misunderstood, when read out of context. He wrote that the reason why I proposed a white liberation theology was that ‘BTL is according to him [Kritzinger] an anti-white theology’ (Vellem 2017:4). I did not use such language myself, but a clue to what Vellem meant with ‘anti-white’ is that he followed that statement immediately with the words:

Kritzinger (1988) puts it this way: [*This*] is not intended as a separate white theology which falls into the trap of apartheid all over again, but a theology which is intimately related to Black Theology, and which unfolds in constant dialogue with it. (p. 4)

This quote explains the sense in which Vellem regarded my view of BTL as ‘anti-white’ and he further clarified it: ‘Comprehensively speaking, BTL is both epistemologically and hermeneutically un-West. It is anti-white, meaning, against whiteness, superiority and inferiority’ (Vellem 2017:6). In other words, BTL un masks and undermines whiteness and can give rise to a liberating white Christianity if it is taken seriously by white theologians.

Another feature of Vellem’s use of the typology, particularly of the ‘sympathy’ response, is that he applied it not only to *white* responses to BTL, but also to the present African National Congress (ANC)-led government:

[I]t is plausible to argue, employing and expanding on his [Kritzinger’s] insights, this motif of sympathy in particular, that the democratic dispensation in South Africa is a ‘sympathetic’ pact in response to black pain in the light of the decolonial turn. It is sympathetic because the core values of racism still exist. (Vellem 2017:5)

In other words, Vellem used the typology not only with reference to white theological responses to BTL but also to the response of a ruling black elite – in a ‘pact’ with the West – to black suffering, a response that has been unable

(or unwilling) to eliminate structural racism and economic suffering.⁶

As I indicated earlier, Kobe (2021:3) referred to Vellem’s (2017) use of my typology in her paper ‘Ubuntu as a spirituality of liberation for black theology of liberation’. Her interpretation of Vellem’s paper seems to suggest that I regarded the three white responses as normative and personally supported all three of them.⁷ As I have explained above, that is not how Vellem understood my typology or how I intended it, but I am using this paper as an opportunity to rethink the typology and develop it further.

Revisiting the typology

The distinction between rejection, sympathy and solidarity, which made sense in my thesis, is inadequate to describe the encounters between white and black theologians. The typology has some inherent weaknesses and my theological method has evolved. This section identifies and discusses the inadequacies of the typology and suggests a new approach. However, first of all I need to clarify the purpose of the typology.

The purpose of the typology

The typology played a dual role in my thesis. Firstly it enabled me to distinguish my own response to Black Theology from that of other white theologians, thus giving my approach a clearer profile. Secondly, it mapped the field in which a liberating white theology (LWT) needs to operate to counteract racism in the white community at large. The question is whether such a typology remains useful to fulfil these or other functions today. Is it not an outdated expression of the modernist desire to label people and put them in boxes?

There are two reasons for continuing to analyse the prevailing positions adopted by white theologians and churches to Black Theology. Firstly, to adopt a position of solidarity means making a choice, taking sides in a broken and divided society, saying NO and YES. According to West (1982:17), prophetic Christianity affirms that ‘contradiction [NO] and transformation [YES] are at the heart of the Christian gospel’. To *affirm* a way of life in solidarity with poor and suffering people is to *negate* a way of life in league with those who exploit, oppress or ignore them. Identifying the options that one negates is helpful for clarifying what one affirms. To expose those options by analysing them carefully is part of a prophetic denunciation of injustice, an overturning of the tables in the sanctuary, which is not an act of hatred or revenge, but an act of ‘tough love’ to try and persuade those

6. My quotes from Vellem’s (2017) paper on ‘Un-thinking the West’ should not create the impression that his use of my typology was the main thrust of his paper. It was only one part of his overall argument that BTL should un-think the hegemony and ‘finality’ of Eurocentric theologies (the West) – a view which I endorse.

7. I base this on Kobe’s words: ‘Vellem (2017) argues that ... Kritzinger repeated his thesis arguments that the response to black resistance *must be in three ways*, rejection, sympathy and solidarity with BTL’ (Kobe 2021:3, italics added), and on the fact that she attributes to me views from all three the response types.

who are captive to idols that exact human sacrifices.⁸ It is a call to conversion, which is not:

[A]n angry attack on the white community, but ... a prophetic attempt at indicating the way in which white people ... may become part of the solution to South Africa's immense problems. (Kritzinger 1988:274)

A call to conversion always has two sides, around which I structured the LWT in my thesis: denouncing (turning *from*) and inviting (turning *to*).⁹ However, one should avoid the danger of self-justification and superiority by admitting that the other white responses to BTL (rejection and sympathy) are not problems that 'they' are having, but a constant temptation for every white theologian, since they represent the world of white privilege within which a LWT attempts to render credible Christian witness.

The second reason why a LWT needs to make a careful study of other white responses to BTL is implicit in the first. The LWT is a call to conversion, attempting to draw white people out of those positions into a praxis of solidarity with suffering black communities. This task of 're-evangelising' the white community (Kritzinger 1991; Saayman 1995) has always been an integral part of BTL and LWT (see Kritzinger 1988:268–270). If the communication of the gospel in this context is seen as an encounter between an intentionally liberating white praxis (LWP) and other white praxes, it is necessary to be thoroughly aware of the other positions people are adopting – and the reasons why they are doing so. Exploring the trends among white responses is therefore not meant as a negative or judgemental 'othering' exercise, but preparation for a ministry to convince others to change their perspective and commit themselves to the church's basic solidarity: 'The church's turn toward the world of the poor ... is the basic solidarity of the church, that with which it carries out its mission and maintains its identity' (Sobrinho & Pico 1985:12).

The construction of 'types' is not the only way to explore white responses to BTL in a systematic way, but it is the approach that I used in my thesis and that I attempt to develop further in this article. I do that by identifying and addressing the weaknesses of the threefold typology.

From theology to performance/praxis

The first weakness of my typology is that by viewing these encounters as 'white responses to Black Theology' frames the interaction primarily as an encounter between *theologies* instead of between *theologians* and *communities*. In my theological journey since 1988, I became aware of the four-dimensional 'pastoral circle' developed by Holland and Henriot (1983) and

8. In my thesis (Kritzinger 1988:284–294), I had identified a number of idols that controlled the lives of white South Africans, and to which thousands of black (and white) lives were sacrificed in South African history: the race idol (Kritzinger 1988:284–287), the land idol (Kritzinger 1988:287–290), the state idol (Kritzinger 1988:290–292) and the money idol (Kritzinger 1988:292–294).

9. The three central chapters of my thesis (Kritzinger 1988:99–335) were: Chapter 4: BTL as critique of South African Christianity [NO]; Chapter 5: BTL as call to liberating mission [YES]; Chapter 6.1.1–6.1.2: White responses to BTL [NO]; Chapter 6.1.3–6.3: Theology for white liberation [YES].

have found it extremely helpful to describe the *performance*¹⁰ of a theologian or theological movement. Lash (1986:45) had suggested that 'the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of Scripture is the life, activity and organization of the Christian community, construed as the *performance* of the biblical text' (italics added). Ramose (2002) deepened this by saying that it is human 'be-ing' itself which is experienced-and-thought as a performance in African communities, thereby emphasising the role of music and dance:

For the Africans the invitation of the dance of be-ing is undecidable since it is understood as an ontological and epistemological imperative To dance along with be-ing is to be attuned to be-ing The concrete expression of African thought is the continual quest for consensus aimed to establish harmony. Harmony gives excellence and beauty to music. (p. 48)

For Ramose (2002:48), this did not mean that Africans are 'by nature a people governed by emotion', since an epistemology governed by the search for harmony has its own rationality, which he called a 'reasoned spontaneity'. There is resonance between Ramose and a theologian like Hauerwas (2004:75–77), who argued that Christian existence is neither primarily a subjective experience nor a mechanical transmission of an objective 'deposit of faith'. Instead it is 'from start to finish a performance', since Christians worship 'a performing God who has invited us to join in the performance that is God's life' (Hauerwas 2004:77).

However, while acknowledging the applicability of terms like *pastoral* or *performance* to describe Christian existence (or be-ing), our group of missiology colleagues at the University of South Africa (UNISA) who started using the circle of Holland and Henriot decided to call it *praxis*,¹¹ so that it became the praxis cycle.¹² We subsequently developed it into a five-dimensional cycle, by adding spirituality (see Karecki 2002):

Spirituality holds a central position ... because it is not a stage in each process, but a motivational source which makes for a unique application in each context depending on who is using the cycle. (p. 139)

I later expanded it to a praxis matrix (Kritzinger 2008), which takes into consideration seven dimensions that shape a particular theology, ministry or mission.¹³ It integrates the 'theological' and 'non-theological' factors that play a role in every form of Christian performance or praxis, highlighting the seven dimensions of agency, contextual understanding, ecclesial scrutiny, interpreting the tradition, discernment for action, reflexivity, and spirituality.¹⁴

10. Theologians like Lash (1986), Young (1990), Hauerwas (2002) and Wells (2004) use 'performance' to characterise the nature of Christian existence (and the interpretation of Scripture), using analogies of music, drama and opera to illumine this.

11. *Praxis* is understood here as action-reflection that is collective, transformative and integrative (see Kritzinger 2002:149f.).

12. I acknowledge the role of Stéphan de Beer and the Institute for Urban Ministry (IUM) in my theological development, for introducing me to the pastoral circle in 1995, which has shaped my theology and ministry ever since.

13. The influential publication, *In word and deed* (Cochrane, De Gruchy & Petersen 1990) also used a seven-dimensional framework, which I used to design the praxis matrix, even though our seven dimensions differ slightly.

14. The connotation of each of these dimensions is explained in Kritzinger (2008).

In order to acknowledge the role of all seven of these dimensions in the interaction between white and black theologians, we need to move away from 'white responses to Black Theology' towards *encounters* between the praxis of a white theologian (or group of theologians) and the praxis of a black theologian (or group of theologians).

From 'white responses to Black Theology of liberation' to 'encounters between praxes'

In the encounters between black and white theologians all seven dimensions of praxis play a role, whether we acknowledge that or not. Our encounters are meetings of two forms of embodied praxis or (more concisely) two embodied *praxes*:

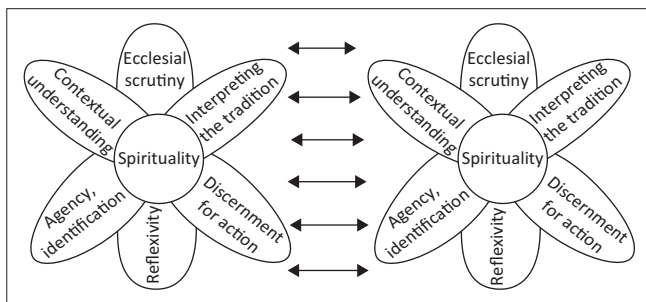


FIGURE 1: The encounter between praxes.

Figure 1 portrays the dynamics of encounter: (1) each praxis is a *system*, shaped by seven interlocking factors and guided by a spirituality; (2) each praxis is an *open system*, constantly interacting with other systems/praxes; (3) an encounter between two praxes is shaped by differences or agreements in every dimension of the matrix. If there is a difference between two praxes regarding one dimension, it affects all the other dimensions – and thereby the whole encounter. When churches or theologians differ on an issue, the debate often rages around the interpretation of specific Bible verses, without considering how differences in the areas of agency, contextual understanding or spirituality have made them part company long before they opened the Bible.

To understand the dynamics of any encounter, we therefore need to explore all seven dimensions of both praxes – and the interplay between them. In continuity with the terminology that I used in my thesis ('liberating white Christianity'), I use the term LWP for the praxis of white theologians who opt for solidarity with BTL.¹⁵ It may seem asymmetrical to consider the interaction between a LWP and a BTL, but since self-naming is essential to an honest encounter, I will not change the term BTL. As suggested by Figure 1, all the dimensions of praxis will surface in the encounter, whatever names the partners choose for themselves.

15. In my thesis I used 'theology for white liberation' and 'liberating white Christianity' interchangeably, but I now prefer to use the participle 'liberating' to the noun 'liberation', to emphasise the method and the ongoing process involved. I follow the advice of Segundo (1976:9) that we should be 'more interested in *being liberative* than in *talking about liberation*. In other words, liberation deals not so much with content as with the method used to theologize in the face of our real-life situation' (italics in original).

White responses: To Black Theology or to black pain?

When the focus of a typology shifts to an encounter between praxes, one of the first issues to be faced is that of agency, in other words, the *Who? With whom? and For whom?* – questions of liberating praxis. One way to answer these questions is to identify the interlocutors of one's praxis. Vellem (2017) answered this question as follows:

Black African philosophy ... and *ipso facto*, liberation reason, whose starting point is the preferential option of the poor, is the anchor of BTL and the source of its own theological grammar. (p. 7)

If a white Christian praxis wishes to be liberating it has to take this same starting point of solidarity with poor and suffering people, in line with the sentiment that:

[A]ll the political theologies, theologies of hope, of revolution, and of liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes. They are not worth one act of faithful participation to liberate man from everything that dehumanizes him and prevents him from living according to the will of the Father. (Gutiérrez 1973:308)

In other words, the typology could be misleading if it suggests that the main challenge facing white theologians is to respond to Black *Theology*, whereas the real challenge is to respond to black pain and dehumanisation. The reason why white theologians should take BTL with utmost seriousness is because that encounter can help them see and feel the reality of black suffering, as articulated and interpreted by black colleagues, because (as black South Africans) they have experienced the humiliation and oppression of racism first hand and are able to articulate that pain and injustice in theological language. White theologians who exercise a preferential option for the poor and begin to theologise from that commitment – from the 'underside of modernity'¹⁶ – need to learn from (and with) BTL how to un-think modernity, of which Enrique Dussel (quoted in Vellem 2017) has said:

The entirety of Modernity, during five centuries, would remain in this state of 'lethargy' of ethical-political consciousness, as if 'asleep', without 'feeling' toward the pain of the peripheral world of the South. (p. 8)

Vellem (2017:9) spoke in this regard about the need to 'grasp the spiritual essence of the tragic obstinacy of the West to wake up to the pain of a black person'. There is indeed a spiritual essence to white, modern obstinacy, which is why there is a need for ongoing conversion. The praxis of dominant white Christianity is shaped by a spirituality that lacks 'orthopathy' (an empathic manner of being),¹⁷ since it is trapped in individualism, white superiority and greed. As a result, the adjective *ortho* (straight, upright, correct) in 'orthodoxy'

16. This expression is quoted from Vellem (2017:2), who referred to the title of Vellem, Sheerattan-Bisnauth and Peacock (eds. 2016): *Bible and theology from the underside of Empire*. The title of that book was adapted from the EATWOT publication: *Theology from the underside of history* (eds. Fabella & Torres 1977).

17. Sobrino (2001:209–211) defined *orthopathy* in Christological term as 'Jesus' *manner of being* in relation to the Kingdom of God and the *Abba*, which goes beyond his orthodoxy and orthopraxis. It has to do with the 'spirit he brought to carrying out his mission', which gave him credibility and 'won the love and trust of the weak' (Sobrino 2001:210). People were 'impressed by his genuineness, truth, firmness, and, above all, his goodness' (Sobrino 2001:211). This positive impact of Jesus' 'actual manner of being' (orthopathy) is what Sobrino regarded as 'the most decisive factor in being able to speak of Jesus as good news' (Sobrino 2001:211). It should therefore be central to a Christian praxis that resonates with that of Jesus.

(interpreting the tradition) and 'orthopraxis' (discernment for action) becomes distorted. However, as Vellem (2017:5) has pointed out, something similar is true of a black Christianity that has settled for a 'sympathetic' political arrangement that ignores (or increases) black suffering.

A typology of Christian praxes in response to black suffering will therefore only be useful to the extent that it serves to facilitate deeper and clearer commitment to the alleviation of that suffering. Such a commitment requires ongoing conversion, which was evocatively formulated by Gutiérrez (1973):

To be converted is to know and experience the fact that, contrary to the laws of physics, we can stand straight, according to the Gospel, only when our center of gravity is outside ourselves. (p. 205)

To learn such an ex-centric – outward-leaning and forward-leaning – *uprightness* is to de-centre the colonial self, by unlearning the (pseudo)innocence, ignorance and arrogance of white superiority.¹⁸ Proponents of LWP need to learn such orthopraxis through interacting with poor communities and theologising 'from there'.

It is crucially important, however, to recognise that black pain does not imply passive or helpless victims, but community agents who pursue their own praxis to survive and to transform their situation. The notion that theologians (or politicians) are 'the voice of the voiceless' is true only to a limited extent, since they *are* able – because of their privileged social locations – to articulate the concerns of the poor in ways that reverberate more widely in public spaces, but – if their solidarity with the poor is authentic – they do little more than amplify and broadcast the voices of the poor themselves, while reflecting theologically on those voices. Vellem (2014) therefore insisted that BTL must continue:

[T]o search unabated for metamorphosed, home-made resources of language and symbols that the poor employ against alienating forces of urbanisation and the displacement of life-giving sources. (p. 6)

To use a musical metaphor, it is only to the extent that the praxis of an academically trained theologian *resonates* with the praxis of the poor themselves that one can speak of solidarity at all. Vellem (2012:2) confirmed this: 'Black Theology of liberation has distinguished itself from Western orthodox theology by choosing the "non-person" as its interlocutor' and, since class is an important factor, 'not every black person is necessarily an interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation'. The acid test for any theology with a liberating intent, whether BTL or LWP, is the extent to which its proponents succeed in becoming organic intellectuals with and among the organic intellectuals of the 'non-persons' themselves.¹⁹ The challenge

18.I used these three terms in a speech at a Sharpeville commemoration rally on 21 March 2016, calling on white South Africans to say farewell to innocence, ignorance and arrogance, while saying yes to being white Africans (Kritzinger 2016).

19. Antonio Gramsci regarded intellectuals as 'purveyors of consciousness', who 'sustain, modify and alter the modes of thinking and behaviour of the masses' (Femia 1981:130). For him, organic intellectuals 'are intellectuals 'who are more closely tied to the class they represent, giving it homogeneity and awareness of its own function'. They differ from 'traditional intellectuals', who 'usually propagate ideas and ways of thinking that are essentially conservative in their implications'.

of achieving this should not be underestimated, but it is true that without incarnational solidarity, 'churches will remain discarnate spiritual enclaves' (De Beer 2017:9). In this regard, ongoing encounters with the articulate leadership of landless and homeless movements such as Reclaim the City,²⁰ Abahlali baseMjondolo²¹ and Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI)²² will help to anchor the encounters between BTL and LWP on the 'rough grounds of praxis' (Pilario 2005), among their declared interlocutors.²³

Encountering God's praxis

The previous point leads directly to another weakness of the typology, namely that it ignores or downplays spirituality. It focusses on encounters between theologians, but it fails to stress the encounter with God. The reason for placing spirituality at the heart of the praxis matrix is that all the dimensions of praxis are shaped by an encounter with God. In missiological terms, this is the foundational encounter in the praxis of faith, as can be seen in the call narratives of Abraham (Gn 12:1–3), Moses (Ex 3:1–15), Isaiah (6:1–13), Jeremiah (1:4–10) and Saul of Tarsus (Ac 9:9–19), to mention only the clearest examples. There is a wide consensus that mission should be viewed as God's initiative and that we are called to participate in the *missio Dei* by the Holy Spirit. From an encounterological approach, it means that God also 'has' a praxis that can be described by means of the matrix, and if we claim to be called and sent by God as agents of transformation in society, then all the encounters between our human praxes are also encounters with God – in God's presence, before God's face (to use an Old Testament expression).

This is not a claim to know God perfectly or to confine God within the parameters of a praxis model. It will require a long explanation to outline God's liberating praxis in terms of the dimensions of the matrix. However, what can be said on the basis of Scripture is that God's praxis of solidarity is not with 'humankind' in general but particularly with those on the 'underside of history'. It is *through them* and *from there* that God in Christ encounters the whole of humanity, calling everyone to account for what they are doing to 'the least' of Christ's sisters and brothers (Mt 25:31–46). The call to

.....
Organic intellectuals 'both serve the interests and reflect the experience of ... the class that is 'rising' (i.e. the possessor of qualities best suited to cope with the newly emergent productive forces)' (Femia 1981:132, italics in original).

20. *Reclaim the City* is a Cape Town based movement of tenants and workers campaigning to stop their displacement from well-located areas and secure access to decent affordable housing. Their campaigns include land redistribution, eviction resistance, housing for evictees, and affordable housing. See <https://www.lessonsforchange.org/reclaim-the-city/> (accessed on 18 June 2021).

21. Abahlali baseMjondolo ('shack dwellers') is a grassroots movement with the motto *Umhlaba, izindlu, nesithunzi* (Land, homes, dignity), which campaigns for the rights of people living in shacks to be consulted and involved in all decisions concerning their lives: 'We as the people who live in shacks are taken as people who cannot think for ourselves. It is assumed that someone who lives in the suburbs, someone who does not know and understand the situation of the people who live in shacks, must think for us' See <https://abahlali.org> (accessed 18 June 2021).

22. Shack Slum Dwellers International is a global social movement of the urban poor, which started in 1996. It forms a network of community-based organisations in 33 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. See <https://sdinet.org> (accessed 18 June 2021).

23. For a challenging reflection on urban social movements as 'irruptions from below' that call the church to embodied solidarity with the urban poor, see De Beer (2017).

discipleship – to take up the cross, to sell everything and give it to the poor, to ‘come and die’ (Bonhoeffer 1959:79) – means (among others) that we are sent and called to *stand with God* among, with and for the poor and oppressed:

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; ... that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. (Belhar 1986, Article 4)

This is where God meets proponents of LWP and BTL: At the foot of the cross, by meeting the Crucified among the cross-bearers (Mofokeng 1983) and encountering the Spirit among black architects of life:

Umoya is rising, in the spirit of forgiveness, coaxing and persuasion without forgetting the devaluing and suppression of the black people. *Umoya* is the creative participation of black people with dignity as architects of life with God the Architect of life. (Vellem 2017:9)

A redesigned typology

In the previous section I identified some weaknesses of the original typology and situated it in an encounterological framework, since I believe that it can still be useful for a LWP. However, it is also necessary to redesign it into a more differentiated instrument.

Flowing from my adoption of a praxis matrix, I firstly replace *white responses* with *white praxes*. Secondly I increase the options from three to six, to give a more diversified picture. This move was partly stimulated by Lochhead (1988), who identified five ‘ideologies’ of interfaith encounter to replace the traditional ‘theology of religions’ approach.²⁴ His five ideologies, which helped me to name my six praxes, are isolation, hostility, competition, partnership and dialogue. My sixfold typology is shown in Table 1.

Each of these six types of praxis is not a monolithic unit but a ‘fuzzy set’ of approaches that have a dominant feature in common. The change in the names of the types, especially the addition of ‘relief’, means that the encounters described here are not only with a BTL but with the plight and pain of the whole black community, as explained above.

It was necessary to add *indifference*, as it is probably the most widespread white praxis in relation to the plight of the black community, and certainly in relation to BTL. The term ‘rejection’ is not normally understood to include indifference, but in my thesis I did mention it briefly as a subset of rejection:

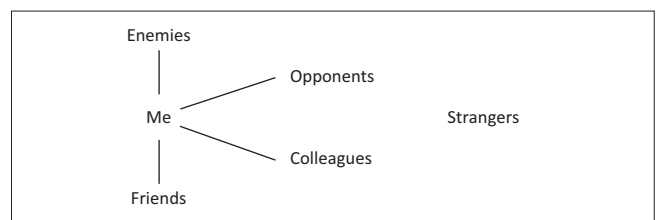
24. Even though Lochhead’s focus is on inter-faith encounters, he indicated that his framework provides ‘a theological understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world’ in general, in other words, with a theology of mission (Lochhead 1988:94ff.).

TABLE 1: A redesigned typology.

White responses to BTL	White praxes in relation to BTL and black pain	Exclusion or embrace
Rejection	Indifference (to ‘strangers’) Hostility (to ‘enemies’)	Exclusion
Sympathy	Condescension (to ‘disadvantaged inferiors’) Relief (for ‘suffering fellow human beings’)	Embrace
Solidarity	Reconciliation (with ‘estranged brothers and sisters’) Solidarity (together with, towards ‘a radically new society’)	

Probably the most common way [of rejecting BTL] is by simply ignoring it as unimportant. White academic arrogance has led theologians to regard Black Theology as not worth responding to. This is the only conclusion which one can reach when observing the silence on Black Theology among most white theologians. (Kritzinger 1988:260)

To make only one brief reference (like this) to indifference is inadequate, precisely because this white praxis is so common.²⁵ Another factor that guided me to add indifference to the typology was the influence of Overdiep (1985), whose ‘emotional distance scale’ distinguished five types of interaction, on a scale from emotionally closest (warmest) to furthest (see Figure 2).



Source: Overdiep, W., 1985, *Het gevecht om de vijand: Bijbels omgaan met een onwelkome onbekende*, Ten Have, Baarn.

FIGURE 2: Emotional distance scale.

The people who are closest to us emotionally are friends and enemies, while colleagues and opponents are further away and strangers are emotionally the furthest.²⁶ They are the ones who ‘leave us cold’, to whom we are indifferent. This form of praxis deserves a separate place in the typology, not only because of the truism that ‘The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference’,²⁷ but also because treating other humans as strangers (Greek *xenoi*) is an act of silent arrogance, which is a fundamental denial of the Christian message. What makes ‘stranger praxis’ so dangerous is that, if it has simmered unnoticed for a long time, it can change quickly to enemy praxis and produce violent hostility, as evidenced by xenophobic attacks in South Africa (and worldwide).

25. In a chapter devoted to Reinhold Niebuhr, Cone (2011:30–64) lamented the indifferent silence of white North American theologians on black suffering, particularly lynching: ‘If white Protestant churches failed to be a beacon of leadership in America’s racial crisis, part of the responsibility for the failure was due to the way its leading religious spokespersons ignored race in their interpretation of the Christian faith’ (Cone 2011:57).

26. It is counterintuitive to say that *both* enmity and friendship are emotionally our *closest* relationships, but on reflection they are indeed the relationships in which we invest most emotional energy – and which take up most of our time.

27. The saying is often attributed to Wiesel (1986): ‘The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference’, but it had a long pre-history. A character in a play by George Bernard Shaw (in 1897) said: ‘The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that’s the essence of inhumanity’. Other occurrences of the saying were in books by the psychologists Wilhelm Stekel (in 1921) and Rollo May (in 1969). See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/05/21/indifference> (Accessed 14 June 2021).

In the expanded typology, the ‘sympathy’ response has made way for two praxes: *condescension* and *relief*, the first being an act of exclusion and the second an act of empathy and embrace. The right hand column in Table 1, distinguishing exclusion from embrace, has been added to help characterise the six praxes. It is influenced by Volf (1996:75), who pointed out that exclusion can take four forms (see Kritzinger 2010:215): *elimination* (“The only good X is a dead X”); *assimilation* (“They must become like us”); *domination* (“They must know their place”); *apathy* or *indifference* (“They leave me cold”). It is clear how Volf’s four categories overlap with the three praxes of indifference, hostility and condescension in my expanded typology. Volf’s view of embrace adds something new, by showing that there is an area between condescending sympathy and solidarity, which I have characterised as *relief* (for ‘suffering fellow human beings’) and *reconciliation* (with ‘estranged brothers and sisters’). Like the previous three praxes, these are not liberation positions, but neither are they openly indifferent, hostile or patronising. There are thousands of white South Africans who are actively involved, on the basis of their Christian faith, in attempts at inter-racial reconciliation and relief/development projects in poor communities. In terms of the categories used in the *Kairos Document* (Institute for Contextual Theology 1986), these are Church Theology praxes, which are unacceptable from the point of view of Prophetic Theology, but they do represent praxes that are distinct from the first three types in the expanded typology and deserve to be treated separately.

A final comment on the expanded typology: The prepositions in Table 1 start with indifference, hostility and condescension *to*, then move to relief *for*, reconciliation *with* and finally solidarity *together with*, *towards* to express the different thrust that characterises each of these white praxes. It should be clear that this typology also suffers from a number of weaknesses, the most important being that it presents only ‘the white side’ of the encounter. As a typology, it can do no more than map the terrain and clear the ground for actual transformative encounters.

Conclusion

This article calls for a follow-up to explore ways in which the framework of transformative encounters suggested in this article can be structured and facilitated. Vellem (2017) envisaged such a transformative engagement between black and white theologians:

Once white people come to such an understanding [of white privilege] and listen to the comprehensive argument by BTL prior to negating it, or defending their actions, a healthy conversation is sure to unfold. (p. 5)

Vuyani Vellem challenged us to make white people understand white privilege and hear the argument of BTL – in order to make a ‘healthy conversation’ possible. He followed that up with the words: ‘This has not happened in

South Africa. It has not happened even in post-1994 South Africa’ (Vellem 2017:5). There have been pockets of such a healthy conversation between black and white people in South Africa, but the challenge remains. Those of us who wish to honour the memory of Vuyani Vellem must make such conversations happen now – and make them sustainable.

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