

# Western theology's whiteness and some Liberation theologies, two sides of the same coin?



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This article explores how the Western theology often employed by European explorers sought to deify 'whiteness'. Whiteness as an ideological construction found the ideal tool in Christianity and through supersessionism detached Jesus of Nazareth from his Jewish roots and clothed him in whiteness, thus making white maleness the idol that all creatures must aspire towards. In defiance, liberation theologians, in particular James Cone, coined the possibility that 'Jesus is black'. Thus, the possibility of Jesus being anything to anyone becomes conceivable. Such a usurpation of the Jesus of Nazareth on either side opens the possibility of recreating Jesus in one's image. This is the coin of idolatry that this article will argue sits at the heart of modern theology. Assuming a dialectical hermeneutic of suspicion, this article explores the problem of modern theology and how some liberation theologies may continue to play second fiddle to the whiteness perpetuated by western theologies like pruning a bonsai tree. Notwithstanding the challenges of decolonising theology, this search conceives the possibility of a non-ideological Christianity that may be confronting the whiteness of western theology and its associated atrocities. Such a quest may lead to a framing of a transformative theology based on honest and interrogative encounter between modern theology and cultural and traditional spiritualities.

**Contribution:** This article explores how liberation theology can become a major player in the theology arena without always playing second fiddle to Western theologies. Exploring decoloniality confronts whiteness in terms of political theology that interlinks anthropology, economics and social welfare.

**Keywords:** Western theology; Christology; whiteness; supersessionism; decolonisation; African theology; liberation theology.

## Introduction

This article's primary focus is on outlining a major problem that Christian theology faces in contemporary times and examining its potential impact on Christian discipleship. While providing solutions is not the main goal at present, diagnosing the issue remains of importance. It is crucial to trace the problem of modern theology's origins and analyse various trajectories that have emerged over time while also considering frameworks for future theological developments. The major assertion here is the following: Modern theology's problem is rooted in whiteness as it manifested itself within Western theology and certain forms of liberation theology have inadvertently fallen into similar pitfalls.

The first step is to engage in a critical reinterpretation of Christian theology that centres on the person and mission of Jesus Christ. This reading acknowledges that through Jesus, God voluntarily relinquished God's divine attributes to take on human nature by being born from the virgin Mary within Israel, which was God's chosen people. The purpose behind this incarnation was for God to reconcile humanity to Godself. Therefore, recognising Jesus' Jewish identity and giving it due significance rather than disregarding or downplaying it is crucial.

Once understanding the location of theology, one is then able to engage with definitions of liberation theology. Vuyani Vellem (2007) offers a broad definition of liberation theologies that will be employed later when dealing with how some of these can become the same side of the western theology they are trying to be emancipated from:

Black Theology in South Africa, Kairos Theology, Black Theology in America, Latin American Liberation Theology, Minjung, Dalit, Feminist Theology, African Theology, Contextual Theology and Womanist

**Note:** Special Collection: Unthink the West, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo and Rothney Tshaka (University of South Africa).

Theology- all use the category of liberation to define their task, purpose, and methodology. All of them; originating from different contexts, symbolize a global, 'worldly' expression of the liberation motif for another possible world. (p. 83)

Vellem further asserts that liberation constitutes a lens through which overarching narratives and extensive dialogues in global politics, economics, religion, culture and societies are examined with relevance to the post-apartheid era. Expanding this viewpoint serves as the cornerstone of my argument, wherein I propose that any misrepresentation of this understanding results in an inadequate theology that fails to elicit transformative change within oppressed communities.

## The problem of modern theology

To better understand the challenges faced by modern theology, I first turn my attention to J, Kameron Carter's scholarly exploration of the connection between race, theology and the black church in America. By examining how race has shaped American history, Carter asserts that it is insufficient to solely consider the racially divided world established through colonial discoveries. Instead, he contends that we must delve further into biblical texts themselves to recognise that even within scripture there exist human distinctions that contribute to and perpetuate a racialised society as early as the 15th century.

The division between Western orthodox theology and liberation theology is a notable phenomenon in modern theological discourse. According to Carter, the disconnection between Christianity and its Jewish origins, as well as Jesus' roots in Israel, lies at the core of both the theological-political '*Judenfrage*' (the question concerning Jews) and broader issues around identity and race (referred to as '*Rassenfrage*') (Carter 2008:80). This connection especially manifests itself within theology but also distorts its understanding. In developing this, Andrew Draper (2018) says Carter:

[S]uggests that Kant's rationalized religion and his use of Jesus Christ as a sort of 'ur-human', or a moral ideal for emulation, effectively unhinged the Centre of Christian faith from the flesh of the Jewish Jesus. (p. 26)

It is this problem that Carter attributes the role of Western theology as a white, male-dominated enterprise that uses the person of 'a dislocated' Jesus as its legitimation of hegemony against all those who are 'other'. '... in a world in which "whiteness" is the structural, universal, and ever more transparent reality, into which all others must enter' (Carter 2012). This is linked with the other side of the coin, that the counter-hegemonic 'Liberation Theologies' have moved within this locus thus unable to provide a theology that can effectively resolve this distortion caused by Western theologies, which are much older and have many historic links and 'traditions' onto which they have held. These theologies that are orthodox in nature have a problem that can be classified as 'whiteness'. Simply put, theology becomes the enterprise where the Western white male is the super-

model of what it means to be fully human – a universal man. This form of theology, I assert took Jesus, the Christ and interpreted him in its likeness. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth becomes an ideal human idea of '*whiteness*' and ceases to be a Jew and his Jewishness is seen as nothing but a necessary step to the fullness of 'humanity'. In line with Carter, the first problem of modern theology therefore becomes a problem of race and supersessionism.

In modern contextual theologies, scholars have recognised that a crucial aspect of achieving full humanity is by interpreting oneself in relation to the Jesus 'idea'. Some liberation theologians, recognising they face being defined as non-white and consequently less than human had as an objective, reclaiming their own identities by redefining the image or appearance of Jesus himself. The underlying argument posits that if one's humanity is contingent upon having Jesus in their lives, then it follows that anyone can be considered fully human because Jesus has the potential for limitless embodiments.

What then becomes evident in this is the two-sided problem of modern theology as we have it now, the distortion of Christian theology into making Jesus Christ a disembodied idea that can then be dropped into any context to affirm that context in its ways. Jesus in this way then does not become the 'One' after whom we mould ourselves but rather, we are the ones who mould Him into our likeness.

Thus, our current endeavour involves examining how some proponents of liberation theology strive to disentangle themselves from oppressive theological paradigms only to inadvertently return to them by operating from a similar vantage point. Additionally, it is posited that contemporary Western civilisation has evolved directly because of this manifestation of Christianity. Consequently, attempts made by certain traditional Western theologians to combat forces like modernity and secularism can be interpreted merely as corrective measures originating within the framework perpetuated by 'whiteness' itself.

I further assert that this theological problem was the source of Christianity's world conquest in the name of the extension of the empire, which was now defined as the extension of God's Kingdom. The expeditions into the lands like Africa and the Americas were now seen as discovering lands for God and country, for 'God, Gold, and Glory' (National Geographic 2022). The encounter with the peoples of these lands will show clearly how these discoveries are nothing, but the perpetuation of the theory that to be human is indeed to be white and male.

Chidester (1996:1) argues in his work *Savage Systems* that religion was employed as a tool to propagate Western civilisation. As a result, he asserts that Christianity lost its emphasis on the relevance and reality of Christ's personhood and transformative potential. Chidester draws upon the ideas of Michel Foucault and Edward Said to highlight how religion has been constructed historically as systems of

knowledge, power and dominance. This construction facilitated Europe's self-proclaimed status as the universal 'Man' while concurrently subjugating, dominating and dehumanising colonised peoples from various cultures around the world.

Theology as an enterprise has been orthodox in a sense that it was for centuries the domain of the Western 'white' males of the Greco-Romano world including its North African regions. This form of theology made Christianity a possession of the West and something that could be used to assert Western domination upon the rest of the world. Perhaps no one explains the problem better than Carolyn Merchant in her analysis of the Amerigo Vespucci's America (Merchant 2003:121) and Abraham Ortelius's 'The theatre of the whole world'. In her argument, Merchant exerts that we need to rediscover the narrative that is Eden from the dominance of Western influence on the world. It is this narrative line that I wish to follow. This dominance is what creates the alternative yet problematic solution of some 'liberation theologies' as counter theologies. Some of the other theologies (black, feminist, minorities, African, etc.) are reactionary but then in their reaction commit the very problem of 'white theology', which is viewing Christ as a possession for our world dominance or freedom from dominance. It is my belief and assertion that this approach to theology has a wrong base, and this needs to be changed for Christianity to be transformative.

Western Christian theology, shaped by the ideology of whiteness, has played a significant role in the colonisation and subjugation of African societies. The assertion here therefore is that any work of redeveloping theology and decoloniality must contend with the very base of modern theology and its casting of humanity as a reflection of whiteness. Decolonising therefore begins with freeing all of humanity from the racialised world of the West. I am now going to engage two critics of the problems we have outlined here hoping that they will help guide us to distil even further what is meant by the problem of modern theology. Barth will be approaching it from the centre of the Metropole, which is European Germany while Chidester will approach it from the colony of Southern Africa.

## Karl Barth and David Chidester on modern theology

In this section, I examine Barth's analysis of the problem of religion and by inference Western theology. Barth aims to clarify that Christianity may indeed represent the one true religion as he carefully engages with scripture and takes into consideration other perspectives on the subject. Of particular interest is how religion has been defined in relation to theology and whether this distinction has either facilitated or hindered theologians' work. After discussing Barth's views, I will turn my attention towards Lindbeck and Milbank's perspectives on religion. This will serve to highlight some of the challenges identified by Barth regarding Western theology as advocated by Milbank and his associates.

The problem with modern theology for Karl Barth without doubt coincides with Schleiermacher's book *On Religion, Speeches to its Culture despisers* of 1799, which shows that the breach was separating the 'new' theology at the time from both 17<sup>th</sup>-century orthodoxy and 18<sup>th</sup>-century enlightenment and pietism (Barth 1960:12). Karl Barth's criticism of modern theology can be summarised by three primary concerns. Firstly, he takes issue with the division between philosophy and theology embraced by liberal theology. This separation leads to a detachment of faith from reason, which in turn diminishes the significance and relevance of theology when confronted with secular humanist ideologies. Secondly, Barth emphasises how this division results in an abdication of responsibility for the world to a secular humanist perspective where Christianity is seen as merely one option among many choices available to individuals. Consequently, this limits Christianity's potential for effecting transformation and reduces it to a matter of personal preference rather than objective truth. Finally, Barth challenges the modern form of philosophical theism, which he believes must be confronted by theology.

Barth argues that theology must challenge and examine the foundational assumptions and convictions of philosophical theism to present a genuine understanding of God and human existence. Barth also emphasises the significance for theology to recognise and actively involve itself with secular humanism's agenda in modernity. According to Barth (1960), secular humanism offers an opposing worldview based on reason and progress that presents an intellectual opposition to Christianity. Therefore, he asserts that theology should not only contest the philosophical foundations of contemporary society but also engage with the aspirations of secular humanism to establish a more comprehensive theological perspective. To put it in his words:

The guiding principle for theology must be confrontation with the contemporary age and its various conceptions, self-understandings and self-evidences, its genuine and less genuine 'movements', its supposed or real progress. (p. 18)

The other problem was that:

[T]heology worked on the general assumption that relatedness to the world is its primary task and on the specific assumption that there is a possibility for the general acceptance of the Christian faith. (Barth 1960:23)

This then meant the task of the theologian changed to being that of dealing with people's relationship to God rather than in God's dealings with people, thus a very anthropocentric approach.

In the book *On religion, The revelation of God as the sublimation of religion*, Barth rests a similar argument. He sets out to prove his three problems in three sections: The problem of religion in theology, religion as faithlessness and the true religion. In looking at Christianity, there is this constant line that one picks up in Barth (2006):

So the real catastrophe of modern Protestant theology was not what has so often been represented: that it increasingly retreated in the face of the growing self-consciousness of modern culture; that it unknowingly allowed itself to be instructed from without – ... Rather, its catastrophe – without which the modern world view, the modern self-conception of man, etc., would not have been able to harm it – was this: that it lost its object, revelation, in its particularity and with it the mustard seed of faith by which it could have moved mountains, even the mountains of modern humanistic culture. (p. 49)

The major problem therefore was in theologians trying to redefine who God is rather than vice versa. Perhaps another strand that we must note is how Barth sees the problem of this period as having stopped treating the cardinal propositions of the Lutheran and the Heidelberg Catechisms as axioms; in fact and in practice, this is a point we will address a little later (Barth 2006:48).

Barth then argues that to understand that religion is faithlessness we must see it from two viewpoints. What is essential for Barth is God's initiative, God's action – which *always* precedes any initiative or action of humanity to understand, worship or serve God. The key issue here is understanding that without God's revelation of Godself to us, we cannot know God. That is, we can only know God because God has allowed Godself to be known by us. After establishing this position, Barth asserts that God's revelation always reaches us in our vain and futile attempts to grasp God on our own. That is, God reveals God's self 'in the midst of that attempt to know God from our own point of view' (Barth 2006:57). This sin of trying to know God from our own point of view is human religion. The problem with human religion is that it creates an image of God based on our ideas and desires of God. The second aspect is that revelation as 'God's self-offering and self-presentation, is the act by which, out of grace and by means of grace, he reconciles man with Himself' (Barth 2006:64).

The Church is described as the place and location of true religion in that it exists through faith and lives by grace. This community is such not by its own definition for there is no such thing as true religion, but a religion can only become true. Barth makes the statement 'The religion of revelation is indeed bound to God's revelation; but God's revelation is not bound to the religion of revelation' (Barth 2006:89). This statement is meant as a warning that Protestant Christianity must take from Israel's fate in it having denied and abandoned God's word and covenant with God in rejecting Jesus Christ.

## Chidester: Savage systems

David Chidester asserts that he is not attempting to provide a comprehensive account of religions, beliefs or practices. Rather, his focus lies in the critical examination of the development and establishment of religion as a conceptual framework on colonial frontiers. In line with Michel Foucault

and Edward Said's perspectives, Chidester highlights how religion has been constructed as an amalgamation of knowledge and power. This construction allowed Europe to position itself as the universalised 'Man', while simultaneously marginalising and subjugating colonised societies through conquest, dominance and objectification (Chidester 1996:2). Chidester acknowledges three fundamental elements that underpin his research: firstly, the role played by frontier comparative religion as a means of exerting local control.

Secondly, the imperial study of comparative religion displayed no interest in examining religions as cohesive and interconnected systems. Instead, they were categorised into a linear sequence from primitive to civilised, purporting to represent the universal development of human history (Chidester 1996:3). This approach to religious knowledge served to enforce global domination over geographical and historical aspects of humanity. Interestingly, this system also had repercussions within Europe itself; Chidester suggests that it permeated European society like poison gradually infecting its very essence.

Thirdly, Chidester highlights how apartheid-era comparative religion exercised control by reinforcing divisions among different languages, cultures and peoples in Southern Africa (Chidester 1996:4). These differences were exaggerated or manipulated as if they constituted separate and distinct regions.

The lack of religion alluded to earlier helped in the annexure of land and livestock. The linking of these primitive religions to either form of Semitic religions was a link to that which was already seen in bad light by the Metropole. Therefore, these African people were either degenerate Jews or linked to some form of Islam (the enemy of the West). Either way therefore, the annexation was justifiable (Chidester 1996:27).

Language also works to define these people, first as non-human, and then as childlike uttering incoherent sounds. Language works in both ways as a genealogical development track where the Khoi language and even the Xhosa language are interpreted as containing sounds like those of the Semitic ethnic groups. This meant that these people are not from these areas (Chidester 1996:142).

As this section is concluded, it is crucial to note that both Barth and Chidester have recognised distinct challenges within religion that hold relevance for the development of liberative theologies. Chidester identifies these issues as originating from the establishment of the 'Western world', while Barth situates them in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. While Barth presents a unique and direct perspective on these concerns, his failure to fully acknowledge their magnitude inadvertently hinders his ability to surpass them. Therefore, it is imperative to consider how imperial actions facilitated modern investigations attributed solely to non-theological

factors by Barth. These very actions align with what Chidester deems essential elements in pursuing knowledge and power that significantly contribute to this predicament.

In his second argument, Barth asserts that Israel's destiny is contingent upon its rejection of Christ. I am convinced that there are valid grounds for Christianity to engage in a dialogue with Israel. This discourse holds significance not solely because of Christian guilt arising from historical injustices, but more importantly because it acknowledges God's election of Israel and the necessity of reminding them of their chosen status. Furthermore, this need highlights the importance for Israel to critically examine itself and take responsibility for its actions both towards God and in relation to others, particularly amid present-day issues in Palestine. This underscores the dangers inherent in perpetuating hegemonic theological frameworks; when one group assumes dominance over interpretation of God's will, even formerly oppressed individuals can become oppressors once they acquire power within contemporary theology.

## Decolonising the effects theology sources have in perpetuating whiteness

### Scripture

In this section, I outline the way in which some sources that form theology may also be the very tools that perpetuate whiteness and enable colonisation, which any theologian who is serious about decolonisation and the development of a transformative Christianity must contend with seriously.

Mofokeng (1988) highlights this about the Bible's use among black people:

Black people of South Africa, point to three dialectically related realities about the bible. They show the central position which the Bible occupies in the process colonization, national oppression, and exploitation. They also confess the incomprehensible paradox of being colonized by a Christian people and yet being converted to their religion and accepting the bible, their ideological instrument of colonization, oppression, and exploitation. Thirdly, they express a historic commitment that is accepted solemnly by one generation and passed on to another – a commitment to terminate exploitation of humans by other humans. (p. 34)

In addressing the question of the Bible being liberative, not only for Africa but for all who turn to it, we must engage some of these historic matters with all earnestness and humility. I turn now to contributions made by two South African theologians (Hermeneutics scholars of protestant tradition) who come from different sides of the race line. Itumeleng Jerry Mosala is a Methodist ordained minister and has been active in the struggle for the liberation of African people from both the liberation movements and the church's side. Gerald Oakley West distinguished himself as a theologian in his passion for the liberation movement and for

making the Bible more accessible as a liberation tool to the marginalised.

### Mosala on the 'Bible as Word of God'

Mosala (1989) argues that:

[T]he insistence on the bible as the 'Word of God' must be seen for what it is: an ideological manoeuvre whereby ruling class interests evident in the Bible are converted into a faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual, and economic divisions. In this way the bible becomes an ahistorical, interclassist document. (p. 18)

He then says that the contextualisation approach also 'conceals the hermeneutically important fact that the texts of the Bible ... are problematical – if only because they are the products of complex and problematical histories and societies' (Mosala 1989:20). He contends that the category of the Word of God does not help bring out the nature of the biblical liberation because it assumes it exists everywhere in the bible. This category is problematic because the people then see 'the emergence of Black Theology as a logical historical development of Christian Theology'. Mosala continues, 'in this way contextual theology is nothing more than "white theology in black clothes"' (Mosala 1989:22).

Mosala also critiques the rise of modern biblical criticism as part of the capitalist world of the West wherein the 'sociological' and 'social scientific' approaches to the bible are proposed. Mosala is quick to point to the futility of this exercise as it does not challenge the current effects of capitalism and the creation of the bourgeois state (Mosala 1989:44). Mosala accedes that the sociological approach has advanced biblical studies by drawing attention to the sociological basis for many of its objects of analysis, but it is precisely at this point that it has taken two steps back by adopting the subtle ideological manoeuvres of modern society, lending an academic aura to what is essentially an ideological political method. It moreover conceals this by using recognised and respected academic methods within the bourgeois society. Mosala states that his plea is 'for an open acknowledgment of the class interests that are being represented and thus an acknowledgment of at least the social limitations of the methods' (Mosala 1989:65).

Brevard Childs (1979) puts the problem behind the 'Word of God' designation as:

[A] problem of the canonical approach to scripture which involves understanding the relationship between the divine initiative in creating Israel's scripture and the human response in receiving and transmitting the authoritative Word. (p. 80)

This is the problem that plagued the reformation era with the reformers claiming the Bible authority came not from the Church but from its containing the Word of God while the Roman Catholics argued that the Church was the human medium through which the Spirit of God had given the scriptures a concrete form and thus tradition could not be set in subordination to Word.

In Barth (1957), one finds the strongest sense and argument for the 'Word of God' concept as the hermeneutical starting point for biblical scholarship:

The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible. The word of God is within the Bible. (p. 43)

Barth (1957) also tackles the issue of those who might struggle with the concept of the Bible as the 'Word of God':

In the bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the theme is, so to speak, the religion of God and never once the religion of the Jews, or Christians, or heathen. (p. 46)

It is this concept that was used by James Cone and other African American black theologians, particularly influenced by Barth's theology. This then is the concept, whose uncritical application Mosala criticises. South African 'Black Theology' modelled itself after America's black theology and South Africa's own Black Consciousness Movement. Among the people who were vocal in such movements are the Bishop Desmond Tutu and the Rev. Allen Boesak. They got parts of their influence from the works of people like James Cone and even in the works of the 'most theoretically astute of black theologians, Cornel West' (Mosala 1989:14). Mosala argues that 'All major Black theological studies in South Africa draw in some way on the work of James Cone'. While he acknowledges that Cone cannot be faulted for omissions in South African black theology, he finds it necessary to trace the trajectory of the biblical hermeneutic of black theology to its first and most outstanding exponent to show how uncritical it has been in the way it was reproduced in South Africa.

In criticising these people, Mosala's main argument is that often liberation movements have consumed the work of scriptures as if it carries no ideology and thus is ahistorical, apolitical 'word of God', which then disables any reading of scripture that would emancipate the oppressed but becomes rather a reading that suits the oppressor. More so he also notes it as a problem within the academy, which produces these scholars and one that indeed has produced even himself and his own lecturers, also as stuck in the same rut. He quotes Marx whose words will work as the backdrop of his thesis: 'The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force ...' (Mosala 1989:14).

Mosala has for me thus far done well in pointing out the problem of the current trajectories of theology and its use of scripture, but I wish he had engaged more deeply with the claims made by those theologians such as Barth in defending the concept 'Word of God'. Its sheer historicity (Tradition) makes it difficult for many, even within the working class, who have been formed by it to just accept such criticism when unengaged. However, Mosala's (1989) point not only

lay in this concept, but he moved on to suggest a reading that demands for anyone who wants to engage the oppression of humans by other humans to contend with:

Black theology needs a new exegetical starting point if it is to become a material force capable of gripping the Black working-class and peasant masses. Such an exegetical point of departure must itself be grounded in a materialist epistemology that is characterized, among other things, by its location of truth not in a world beyond history but indeed within the crucible of historical struggles. The social, cultural, political and economical world of the black working class and peasantry constitutes the only valid hermeneutical starting point for a black theology of liberation. (p. 21)

The earlier Mosala used Fong's argument that theology or religion remains a tool for oppression or an ideology unless it is rooted in society, that unless it is a humanly constructed universe of meaning reflecting the needs and goals of a community, it is a form of false consciousness (Mosala 1983:18). He argues that:

[T]he task of establishing the relation between Christianity and traditional beliefs is a non-starter until the social context of the latter has been explicated and ... 'bounced-off' the social context of the former as it appears in the biblical documents. (p. 23)

It is, therefore, this trajectory that lends itself to his hermeneutical starting point being the people's struggle.

This development, a hermeneutical starting point that is based on the struggles of the people, is where Mosala's work was cut-throat. My criticism here is that while the struggle for liberation among South African people was at its peak in the era of Mosala's writings, what then do we do when the political struggle changes? Do we go back to the church as others were suggesting? Mosala's response was an emphatic 'no', but still has not yet offered a solid grounding of the concept 'struggle'. Indeed, the political struggle is 'over' and the very people who were struggling now sit in power, what shape does the struggle take now? Is the shifting hermeneutical key true grounding for the gospel of Jesus Christ? I am also uneasy with the idea of using Marx and Hegel for all his work. There is a difference between adopting the method of Marxist social analysis in critiquing Christianity and the adoption of Marxist materialism as a base for theology. Here Mosala's own socialist inclinations are betrayed the most perhaps. Furthermore, while it is true that no theology is neutral, materialist readers must remember not to claim as 'western theology' has done to be the sole possessor of the truth. This is where the biggest problem of modern theology lies, but that is a more constructive move needing more room than we have here.

This is where Gerald O. West steps in and following a trajectory of embedded theologies brings in the church which has somehow been missing or expected to become scholarly in their approaches. Mosala's approach expects a certain level of expertise in both biblical exegesis and sociological philosophies such as Marxism, which are not possible for the very people he is interested in fighting for – the working class

and peasants. Along these lines, West says the ordinary reader may be politically conscientised, but they do not have the historical and sociological tools to engage a biblical text as Mosala, Gottwald and Schussler Fiorenza would (West 1995:199).

West speaks of finding 'Embodied Theologies' that are operative on the ground where the church is. This is where the kind of theology that is operational is not usually articulated, but it is a theology that the people live by. In identifying it he notes two problems: 'First this "embodied" theology is not often consciously articulated and owned, and so a default church theology is often the initial 'theological' response' (West 2005:26). Secondly, embodied theology, when it comes to articulation, is not usually evident in the public theology of the church. Having noted this he then says in some of his work, his focus is on:

[H]ow the bible may play quite a different role in the process of enabling an articulation of embedded theologies so that they may then be mainstreamed or in/corporated into the theology of the church. (West 2005:26)

The use of the Bible in this way is to enable both the trained reader and the ordinary reader to join in the discussion of the bible in the context of liberation. Two steps for West are necessary; firstly, the trained reader must seek where the ordinary reader is and how they read the Bible. Secondly though, there needs to be an honest analysis of the relationship between the ordinary reader and the trained reader in liberation hermeneutics (West 1995:200). The fear here stems from the fact that the academy may be moving in a trajectory of its own assuming that they know what is needed by the ordinary reader thus imposing their knowledge rather than reading with the other.

Put differently, for the Bible to be a tool for liberation in South Africa: Mosala argues the Bible must be read critically, and so the ordinary reader must, to some extent, be dependent on the work of biblical scholarship. For this (*liberation*) to happen:

Nolan argues, the Bible must be read from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, and so the trained reader must to some extent be dependent on the readings of ordinary readers. (West 1995:198)

Neither of these readings minimises the other's input and both stress the need for the other if this relationship is going to yield something of a liberative Bible reading.

Furthermore, for West these moves within biblical hermeneutics were not just for the benefit of the academy and the church but for the whole of society in general. This is why in a 2005 article cited earlier, he works with Bediako's statement: 'Further developments in African Christianity will test the depth of the impact that the Bible has made upon Africa' (West 1997:99). But then he flips the statement to read: 'Further developments in African Christianity will evaluate the depth of the impact that *Africa has made upon the Bible*'.

The Bible therefore remains a tool for liberation and prophetic ministry – impacted differently, which is where the reading with the ordinary readers will continue to be useful in a church that sometimes loses her prophetic voice.

West is hopeful that the struggle is not over and it remains an important and achievable task. The challenge is to find ways of enabling biblical readings and articulation of theologies formed in the struggles within the public of the church. West sees this as a theology that 'tends to be a movement of protest which is situated among the disinherited and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who decisively intrudes, even against seemingly impenetrable institutions and orderings' (West 2005:24).

## Tradition and the magisterium

Interestingly, there is little to be said by African theology except for the few remarks that have been made above that in some way the historic life of the church as an institution cannot be ignored in creating a theology for any context.

When one looks at the impact of the magisterium on the Western theology and whiteness, it is unfortunate that those in the position of power like Cardinal Ratzinger (1995) (Pope Emeritus Benedict) so naively hold onto their stances and fail to see the effects of their positions.

Pluralism happens, not when we make it the object of our desire, but when everyone wants the truth with all his power and in his own epoch. But to desire it requires that, instead of making ourselves the measure, we accept as the voice and the way of truth the greater understanding which is already present as a prior given in the Church's faith. I believe, moreover, that this same law applies to the new guiding models of theology which are sought today: African, Latin American, Asian theology, and so on. (p. 97)

This is the illusive nature of orthodoxy; it is so ingrained in our thinking that it almost sounds correct and reasonable. Ratzinger goes on in this statement to show how the other countries of Europe got onto the Roman programme, yet it never occurs in his 'belief' that what he says here is inapplicable to Africa, Latin America, and Asia as he calls them. The words sound noble, but the patronising nature of their intention has not been removed. The prior given he speaks of cannot unfortunately be the truth of the gospel but the truth of the authority of the magisterium, and this is fraught with problems.

In Africa linked closely to tradition is experience that would include the experience of those who practice African Traditional Religions. The belief is strongly held that within the cultures of the people, there are too many ways in which the biblical texts correlate with Africa than many in the West have wanted to believe. In fact, William Colenso the Bishop of Natal, a missionary coloniser to AmaZulu was so perplexed with this that Chidester says, he beheld biblical scenes in Africa. 'He observed a pastoral lifestyle, patriarchal households, animal sacrifices, seasonal festivals' AmaZulu also perpetuated a

cycle of religious lifestyle that was just like ancient Israel. 'The Zulu keeps his annual feasts, and observes the New Moons, as the old Hebrews did' (Chidester 1996:137).

Christianity was a complete religion and one that could not be influenced nor certainly learned from the primitive people of the colony. Else in the continent Bediako wrote 'Translation enabled the bible to become "an independent yardstick by which to test, and sometimes to reject, what Western missionaries taught and practised"' (West 1997:107).

Having looked at how both scripture and church tradition have been used to prop up Western orthodoxy and have not allowed any space for alternative constructions. The other concept to be dealt with is how liberation theologies have tried to find an unideological form of Christianity where neither the church's reading of scripture nor her traditions are western influenced.

## The search for an unideological Christianity

In the context of this article, the enterprise of searching for a Christianity that is unaffected by Western influences is another time waster that keeps some liberation theologians busy with ineffective exercises. Maluleke (1997) says:

But there is a wild goose chase in which Black and African theologies have been involved. It is a search for an unideological Christianity. This is the hankering after a pure Christianity untainted by ideologies and cultures ... such a quest provides a false premise on which we cannot construct a credible theology. (p. 16)

Furlong argues this point by asking if the Catholic Church is too westernised, and therefore there is a justification in discarding everything but the bare necessities of the gospel message?

If that is so, how are we to judge what is essential and what is incidental? The teaching authority of the Church ceases to be the criterion, since it is too ethnocentric (all popes since late antiquity have been European). (Furlong 1983:1)

Furlong's argument is for the magisterium to be recognised as such because Christianity is indeed an ethnic religion, Jesus was a Jew and Paul had a lot of Greek influence which then renders Christianity Greco-Semantic in many ways. I agree with the argument in its recognition of the magisterium's role, however, both positive and negative.

Maluleke makes a plea that in order for African theology to move forward and beyond the stagnant stage that it seems to be in currently, it must recognise and build upon the ground already covered (Maluleke 1997:5). He asserts that construction, innovation and contextualisation in African theology and/or Christianity should not be left in the hands of each generation as if there was no activity that has gone before. In an earlier article, he had traced in the works of Mbiti, Sanneh, Bediako and Idowu that African theology has made its mark from a place of doubt that what was contained is not a transplantation of some European cult; that it is here

to stay and in South Africa since the 1980s has thrust the question of how to ensure that Christianity in Africa is truly African to the forefront (Maluleke 1997:4).

The search for an authentic Christianity should therefore encompass a contemporary theological movement that seeks to transcend rigid doctrinal convictions and inflexible ideological structures. Its primary objective is to highlight the core principles of the Christian faith while acknowledging the limitations inherent in human comprehension and recognising the complexities involved in religious encounters. The aim of this perspective is to promote dialogue, inclusivity and humility in exploring Christianity. By embracing a broader interpretation of this faith – one characterised by openness and inclusion – authentic Christianity strives to move beyond narrow and exclusive understandings of Christian teachings. Considering these factors, it becomes pertinent to inquire whether we can indeed transcend our idolatrous tendencies towards whiteness or creating Jesus in our own image as we engage with theology within an African context.

## Other factors in this idolatrous relationship of whiteness and some forms of liberation theologies

I have attempted to point out that the basis on which whiteness was formed contained cracks that were seen by those who were also privileged to live within it, Karl Barth among them. It is the earlier James Cone who used Barth to then problematise the issues of whiteness in theology and was then able to effectively articulate a black theology of liberation. Cone relied a great deal on Barth's critique of Western theology's reliance on 'abstract thought' as a basis for theologising. Cone took this a step further in showing how this abstract thought was a cause for whiteness to view itself as being the ideal outcome of the workings of theology.

Cone (2010) soon moved away from the reliance on Barth and using analogy was then able to conceive the 'Black Christ'. In '*A black theology of Liberation*', he asserts:

If Christ is truly the Suffering Servant of God who takes upon himself the suffering of his people, thereby re-establishing the covenant of God, then he must be black. [...] Black theology contends that blackness is the only symbol that cannot be overlooked if we are going to take seriously the Christological significance of Jesus Christ. (pp. 122–123)

Carter (2008) clarifies Cone's notion of the black Jesus by showing how Cone moved away from Barth's *analogia fidei* to Tillich's *analogia existentia* on symbolism and analogy:

It is this specific way of understanding the doctrine of analogy – that is, in terms of *analogia existentia* – that allows Cone to resolve the dialectical relations between 'Jesus is who he was', 'Jesus is who he is', and 'Jesus is who he will be' into 'Jesus is black'. (p. 171)

What becomes problematic here is that this notion of conceptualising Jesus then lends itself into the very problem

of whiteness where Jesus is seen as an ideal that can be claimed by any context to justify its existence.

Carter (2008) concludes the critique on Cone this way:

Tragically, however, for all its good black liberation theology's attempt philosophically and theologically to salvage the blackness that modernity has constructed by converting it into a site of cultural power is not radical enough. This is because it ironically leaves whiteness in place. In order to name and assault more radically the problem of whiteness, what is needed is an understanding of Christian existence as ever-grounded in the Jewish, nonracial flesh of Jesus and this as an articulation of the covenantal life of Israel. (p. 192)

On the other hand, there have been developments in alternative theologies, which have cast themselves as stepping forth from liberation theologies. One such theology has been 'reconstruction theology' coined by Mugambi that proposed that in the postcolonial Africa, theology particularly liberation theologies (black theology in South Africa, African women's theology and cultural theology) need to move from liberation and focus on reconstruction. Solomons and Klaasens (2019) sum up how Charles Villa-Vicencio picked up the project and sought to step forward with it:

Villa-Vicencio further maintained that as a liberating theology, reconstruction stands for the radical transformation of a post-apartheid society. Because liberation has not produced the strategies for reconstruction, theology based on a new metaphor of reconstruction is needed, shifting the conversation from liberation's 'no' to reconstruction's 'yes'. (p. 262)

This form of restructuring cannot be good for liberation theology and will certainly not yield a type of envisaged transformation because it de-legitimatises the existence of liberation theology as though it was a passing phase no longer needed now that we are in a democratic dispensation. West (2010) argues this point:

As long as the God of life is engaged against the idols of death ... there is a need for forms of liberation hermeneutics which work with and proclaim the God of life. (p. 158)

The main argument I have made thus far, therefore, is that while Cone is clear on the relationship between the Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ, some who drew inspiration from him have missed this and are thus stuck in what is the problem of theology as whiteness; the supersessionist approach that Jesus can then just take any form of the oppressed community and give that community the power of othering. The call here is to unlearn this habit and begin to reshape a theology that affirms and speaks fully against theologies that have sought to dehumanise others.

Vuyani Vellem (2017) puts it this way:

Comprehensively speaking, BTL is both epistemologically and hermeneutically un-West. It is anti-white, meaning, against whiteness, superiority, and inferiority. It points beyond – not in dualistic terms – the promises of white theology. The spiritual foundation of blackness is outside the lethargic sleep by the West at the violence and destruction of the black. (p. 6)

## Discussion and conclusion

I have tried to diagnostically display that the ideology of whiteness and Western theology in Africa is a complex issue with far-reaching implications for decolonisation and transformation in theological engagement. I have argued that for any liberation theology to take its place in the academia and in the social public, it needs to refuse to be drawn into the abstract forms that have occupied whiteness and thus Western theology. This is not a racist pursuit but rather a search for an authentic theology that the likes of Karl Barth, James Cone, right down to Itumeleng Mosala and Vuyani Vellem have also been actively involved in.

Whiteness, as an ideology, encompasses social, cultural and political beliefs that position white people and Western norms as superior. This has been deeply embedded in various aspects of African society including theology and ecclesiology. To understand the challenges and potential for decolonising Western theology in Africa, it is important to consider 'the epistemological questions around how theology constructs knowledge and which sources are deemed authentic and by whom' (Sakupapa 2019:418). When African theologians can hear their own voices, they can begin a conversation with other theologians that may begin to create a better-structured theological convergence and search for truth.

Using the dialectical discourse between the various theologians and their understanding of modern theology, I hope I have shown that effectively de-centring whiteness and decolonising Western theology in Africa requires a critical evaluation and restructuring of these systems to prioritise African perspectives and voices. This process entails breaking away from the universalising nature of Western theology while embracing an agency that is grounded in African traditions, viewpoints and epistemologies. Like other academic disciplines, theology plays a significant role in perpetuating and facilitating epistemological colonialism. The alternative is not the extremes of liberation theology but rather a critical and transformative centre that seeks to rediscover Jesus beyond the normative binaries of modern theology and subjectivity of some liberation theologies.

Liberation theology, as explored by Mosala and West, emphasises the importance of grounding theology in human experiences and perspectives. It cautions against deviating from this rootedness, as it can lead to a dangerous reliance on whiteness. To preserve the integrity of theological developments, one must resist the temptation to embrace trendy catch phrases or concepts that dilute its essence into a superficial trend lacking impact.

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