

James Cone, the Urban Church in South Africa, and Theological (Re)Education: A Personal Reflection

Stephan de Beer

ABSTRACT

This essay uses as backdrop the work of James Cone, and is foregrounded by a personal reflection of epistemological and theological rupture. Through the lenses of Cone's black theology of liberation, I lament the irrelevance of both black and white churches, as well as theological education, in relation to contemporary urban struggles in South Africa.

Introduction

Taking Cone's assertions as starting point, I reflect on the urban church and theological education in South Africa today, arguing for a theological re-education of ourselves, our faith communities and our dominant theological curricula, if we are to be a contemporary church of the oppressed.

The first part of the article offers an auto-ethnographic reflection that describes ruptures that mediated existential and theological shifts in myself. In the second part I read the South African urban church and theological education through the lenses of James Cone. In the third part I re-imagine theological education through on-going disruptive conversions and the interlocution of the (black) oppressed. Only such ruptures, I suggest, could mediate radical, prophetic theologies that take sides, and get expressed in a church of solidarity, standing with the (urban) oppressed.

Part 1: A Small Auto-Ethnography

Growing up in a white inner city neighbourhood in Pretoria, South Africa
I grew up in Sunnyside, Pretoria. It is adjacent to the Burgers Park neighbourhood of the inner city. For the past 46 years these two neighbourhoods were home. When

I was young I felt sheltered by the streets and buildings; the voices of neighbours and noises of city life made me feel strangely protected. I felt embraced and had a sense that I belonged. I do not feel it everywhere. But I felt it here. And still do.

These neighbourhoods were all white when I grew up. Black people in Sunnyside were cleaners, gardeners, or domestic workers, mostly only in the city during working hours, or, if employed in one of the many apartment buildings lining the streets of this neighbourhood, living in so-called servant quarters at the back of these buildings. It was not until much later that I realised: the warmth and embrace I felt in the inner city was not shared by others. If you were homeless or poor or black, you were not welcomed in my neighbourhood. It was only meant for people “like us”.

Even though this was an exclusively white neighbourhood when I grew up, it was often still regarded as inferior from the perspective of suburban whiteness, dominant in the apartheid capital city of South Africa. Those who stayed in Sunnyside as long-term residents were often single-parent families (predominantly female-led), senior citizens or people finding themselves in gay and other sub-cultures, frowned upon by dominant white culture. Young working people, students or young families, mostly used Sunnyside as a springboard from where they would move to the surrounding suburbs once they were able to purchase property. Sunnyside, to most people who could afford to aspire to suburban living, was only ever a place of transition.

Studying in a white Reformed theological institution

I studied theology at the University of Pretoria between 1986 and 1991. There were no black students in our Faculty and only a handful of female students. Curiously, there were two Faculties of Theology at the same University, both serving white Afrikaner students of two Afrikaans Reformed denominations, which were also where professors of the Faculty of Theology were drawn from. Yet, in spite of such proximity of tradition, language and ethnicity, they were unable to collaborate at that point in one Faculty structure.¹

Only later would the injustice of my theological education dawn on me. Whilst studying – until the inner city neighbourhood of Hillbrow in Johannesburg turned my personal and theological worlds upside down – I occupied a bubble of white, orthodox and intellectual theological preoccupation, that had little to do with the larger South African contexts we found ourselves in. We found it possible

1 Conrad Wethmar, “Theological Education in an Ecumenical Context: Principles and Procedures of the Pretoria Model,” *Skriften Kerk*, 21(2), (2000), 416-427.

to do theology as if in a vacuum, to intellectualize about a God of compassion and justice, as if our country was not burning, a few kilometres away, in the surrounding black townships.

By the mid-1980s, South Africa was in flames, with violent resistance and escalating insurgency from all borders, including the ones inside the country.²

In a context of growing resistance against the apartheid state, the response of the state was “to declare a state of emergency”.³ In spite of growing resistance and a state of emergency, inside the building and classrooms of the Faculties of Theology, we went on with business as usual, still mostly embedded in a state theology so aptly and prophetically critiqued by the Kairos Document. That we were living in a country in which the vast majority of black inhabitants was excluded from that which we took for granted – and those resisting such exclusion persecuted, prosecuted and tortured – was not the content of our theological, or indeed ethical, enquiry.

Black children. In a white neighbourhood

Somewhere during that time, I became aware of children living on the streets of Sunnyside, the neighbourhood I called home. They were black children at a time when Sunnyside was still a white neighbourhood. This was the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. It was the beginning of the end for the apartheid state. We were a few friends, concerned with children living vulnerably on the streets, and responding by creating the first overnight shelter for boys who were homeless in inner city Pretoria, in a vacant church building.

Our involvement with the boys was not driven by a political agenda, nor informed by a political theology, and we did not (yet) see their presence as a prophetic act in an exclusivist city. We felt compelled by the compassion of Christ. And yet, their presence represented a threat to the “white only” existence of this neighbourhood, but also of the entire city. Anyone standing in solidarity with them, was seen as reinforcing such a threat. Deeply vulnerable children, completely harmless, threatened the Afrikaner-establishment of Sunnyside to its core. What was simply a compassionate response, soon became tested and transformed, at least for me, by the literal fire of this immersion. It became an induction into the harsh racial politics of the city and its courts, and the accompanying silence of the church.

2 South African History Archive 2018, “Commemorating the End Conscription Campaign. A State of Emergency”, <http://www.saha.org.za/ecc25/ecc_under_a_state_of_emergency.htm>, retrieved 8 July 2018.

3 South African History Archive 2018, “Commemorating the End Conscription Campaign. A State of Emergency”, <http://www.saha.org.za/ecc25/ecc_under_a_state_of_emergency.htm>, retrieved 8 July 2018.

Elsewhere,⁴ in a book chapter with Genevieve James, we relate the events that occurred during this time. Months of harassment by police, and opposition by neighbouring businesses, were followed by a blaze that burnt down the church building, and 8 children died. An inquest followed to establish the cause of the fire, but arson could never be proven beyond any doubt.

Independent forensic investigator, David Klatzow,⁵ relating the incident to Sylvia Walker, said: “From the beginning, it appeared obvious that this was no accident”. In the account of Klatzow,⁶ the inquest that had to establish the cause of the fire, “became a mere repetition of many other inquests of its time”. The prosecutor and magistrate displayed aggressive bias in favour of the police, with no one ever brought to task.

For Klatzow it was clear that “(p)roper justice would have meant the prosecution of the white policemen”, and yet, sadly, in those days it was not considered a real crime to kill a few black children – a tragic reflection of the times”.⁷

Some churches provided support when we sheltered the boys, in the form of food, clothes and individuals volunteering their time. But when the fire occurred, questions had to be asked about the cause of the fire and whether there was foul play from the police or others. Suddenly the church became largely absent, with only a few individual church people still offering support.

For me personally, it started a completely new personal, political and theological journey, constituting “a theological conversion to ‘justice’”,⁸ and what justice might look like in concrete terms.

An African-American neighbourhood, and Rev. B. Herbert Martin

Not much later, I was due in Chicago to spend 6 months in an urban theological education programme. I ended up in the Brownsville neighbourhood on the near south side of Chicago, an African-American community with a rich history but also severe challenges. It was early April 1992. I arrived shortly after the Rodney King trial and subsequent riots in inner city neighbourhoods in Los Angeles. As a young South African, I was stunned by the segregated nature of Chicagoan neighbourhoods, hardly seeing any other whites in this neighbourhood during my six months of living here.

4 S.F. de Beer & G.L. James, 2014, “Recovering a Gospel of Love through Children: Shattering Faith, Knowledge and Justice”, in *Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives*, edited by B. Prevette, K.J. White, C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, & D.J. Konz (Eugene, OR, Wipf & Stock, 2014), 80-82.

5 David Klatzow & Sylvia Walker, *Steeped in Blood: The Life and Times of a Forensic Scientist* (Cape Town Zebra Press, 2010), 140.

6 Klatzow & Walker, *Steeped in Blood*, 141.

7 Klatzow & Walker, *Steeped in Blood*, 141.

8 De Beer & James, “Recovering a Gospel of Love through Children”, 82.

I lived in the home of Rev. B. Herbert Martin, a black urban pastor-activist, who led the Progressive Community Church on Chicago's South Side, for many years. Herbert was my host, but also became a friend, mentor and provocateur. His life and commitments modelled a way of being an urban pastor, and an understanding of church, foreign to anything I was exposed to before. There was no dichotomy between pastoral and political action, or personal and professional commitments, as these were fused into an integrated way of being and living. The ecclesiology of his local church was shaped by the struggles of parishioners and community members alike. His understanding of urban pastorate is captured by his own words:

We have to exemplify the power of the resurrection daily and how that gospel applies to our liberation ... how do we teach it to people so it's more than just a recitation of Scripture? The pastor has to live that out in the community with the people outside of Sunday preaching.⁹

His pastoral understanding embraced the whole city, and he thought of himself as pastor to the City of Chicago.¹⁰ He was deeply involved in the housing struggles of inner city neighbourhoods and the housing conditions of people living in nearby public housing projects. Many of his members came from these projects, and he himself lived in the neighbourhood. He became well-known for being the pastor of Chicago's first black mayor, Harold Washington, and committed himself to the advancement of black people, and people of colour generally, throughout his ministry. Unashamedly black, and in solidarity with his black neighbours, fighting for social, economic, political and spatial justice, yet at the same time he always maintained an unwavering commitment to reconciliation and inter-faith collaboration.

In the Progressive church community, I experienced an assertiveness flowing from a deep affirmation of life, self-worth, equality and dignity. Here black theology was lived, sung, preached and danced, even though I did not always understand everything cerebrally. But as the church oozed it, in and with their beings, I was socialized into it. What won me over was the deep immersion of B. Herbert and his congregation in the lives and struggles of their local black neighbourhoods, but also in the deeper struggles of humanity in the City of Chicago and its surroundings; the integrity (fusion) of spirituality and political action, and personal and professional commitment; and the warm hospitality shown to me as a young white South African, representing the apartheid oppressor, by B. Herbert, my house mate Gregory D. Allen, as well as their immediate community. They

9 "The Centre for the Church and the Black Experience", Rev. B. Herbert Martin, <<https://cbe45.com/2016/04/14/rev-b-herbert-martin/>>, retrieved 18 June 2018.

10 Progressive Community Church, n.d., "About our Pastor", <<http://www.progressive-cc.org/about-1/>>, retrieved 18 June 2018.

needed not welcome nor embrace me unconditionally, but they did.

Their hospitality and kindness created a safe space for tough personal and theological re-education, and provided an invaluable lesson in prophetic love.

Re-rooting, in a new South African inner city

Returning to South Africa towards the end of 1992, I realized that something markedly happened to me. I had a deep sense that the preceding months of first the Elim Church, and then inner city Chicago, shifted my whole life orientation. I now asked: “Who is God? Who is God with? Who is God for?” I realised that God cannot be neutral although my faith previously would have had me believe in a neutral loving God, aloof from the suffering caused to millions of fellow South Africans.

Also during this time, in both course work and independent reading, I was exposed to theologies I was largely unexposed to up to this point.

...the realities of children living on the streets of Sunnyside and Chicago... opened me to the Black Theology of Cone, the liberationist theological perspectives of Gutierrez, the challenge of Christ in the context of blackness and Africanness...”¹¹

Upon my return, an opportunity arose to help establish a grass-root ecumenical community organization in Pretoria’s inner city. The inner city neighbourhoods of Sunnyside and Burgers Park, all white in the early 1990s, became 90% black by 2000. In this context we had the opportunity to participate in re-storying the inner city, away from the exclusions and injustices of the past, and into a new era. Issues of race, class, and gender were intricately part of the dynamics we had to face on a daily basis.

In 1996 I was ordained in the Melodi ya Tshwane congregation of the Uniting Reformed Church, embraced by a church council that was predominantly made up of black domestic workers. At the moment of ordination, I had to sign the Belhar Confession, which was adopted by the Uniting Reformed Church.¹² Signing the Belhar Confession for me became a very public way of committing myself to a God, who, “in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged”.¹³ It became a desire to stand against “neutrality”, taking sides existentially, theologically, and ecclesially.

11 De Beer & James, 83.

12 *The Confession of Belhar* (Belhar: LUS Publishers, 1986). The Belhar Confession was originally drafted in 1982, by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church, as a theological response to Apartheid. In 1986 this denomination adopted the Belhar Confession as one of their statements of belief. After unification between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, in 1994, the newly named Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) also adopted the Belhar Confession as a statement of belief.

13 *The Confession of Belhar*.

Part 2: Reading the Urban Church and Theological Education through the Lens of James Cone

The urban struggle

Not a week goes by without urban protest in South Africa today. In places like Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria and Johannesburg, it could easily happen that 3 or 4 different neighbourhoods at the same time experience streets closed through barricades, burning tyres, and even violent clashes between police and protesters.¹⁴ Protesters voice their anger and frustration at poor service delivery, lack of access to land, huge housing backlogs, corrupt government officials, and a myriad of other existential concerns affecting community well-being.

The protests are symptomatic of a deeply untransformed urban landscape, with persistent patterns of socio-spatial segregation, unequal access to health care, education and economic opportunity, and a collapse of social services in many communities. The majority of urban dwellers experiencing exclusion from good, accessible and affordable socio-economic and physical infrastructure happens to be black.

The socio-economic struggles of people are increasingly responded to by communities organizing themselves, activated by deep anger, frustration and pain, and growing impatient with false promises and delayed opportunity. Perkinson¹⁵ speaks to an “insurgent beat” in the rough grounds of urban Detroit, but it also resembles what is currently happening in urban neighbourhoods around South Africa:

...small cadres of citizenry – a few pastors, various community activists, the old “exiled” school board and city officials, renegade artists, some resolute retirees and animated youngsters finding common cause – organizing to push back.¹⁶

It is disturbing how churches and church leaders – whether black or white – are hardly engaging in these protests, or in addressing the conditions causing protests. There are the rare exceptions in persons like emeritus-bishop Ruben Philip in

14 N. Gous, “Municipalities face protests almost every two days since start of 2018”, *Times Live*, (6 April 2018), <<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-04-06-municipalities-face-protests-almost-every-two-days-since-start-of-2018/>>, retrieved 15 July 2018; G. Makhafola, “144 service delivery protests recorded in 2018 so far”, (11 July 2018), <<https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/144-service-delivery-protests-recorded-in-2018-so-far-15961274>>, retrieved 15 July 2018; G. Quintal, “Service delivery protests increasing and most are violent”, *Times Live*, (14 May 2018), <<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-05-14-service-delivery-protests-increasing-and-most-are-violent/>>, retrieved 12 July 2018.

15 James W. Perkinson, *Messianism, Against Christology: Resistance Movements, Folk Arts, and Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 170.

16 Perkinson, *Messianism Against Christology*, 170.

Durban¹⁷ or Bishop Paul Verryn.¹⁸ But generally speaking, the systemic exclusion of a people, over generations, are hardly considered liturgically or in our preaching.

This was one of James Cone's¹⁹ greatest concerns, even 50 years ago. With reference to escalating riots in poor, predominantly black, urban communities in the US, Cone spoke of how church leaders would rather condemn the riots than the evil that creates the conditions for riots in the first place. Cone, in response, had these harsh words to say: "when a minister condemns the rioters and blesses by silence the conditions which produce the riots, he gives up his credentials to be a Christian minister, and becomes inhuman".²⁰ In how far have our ministers, theologians, and churches therefore seized to be human, at worst, or to be mediators of good news, at least, if we fail to concretely engage the conditions faced by the majorities living on our urban fringes?

The state of the urban church in South Africa today

One cannot speak of one urban church. The church in urban South Africa is more heterogeneous than ever before, and at the same time marked by deep divisions. With some refreshing exceptions, the dominant expression of the church is still rather segregated. I would like to briefly distinguish between different urban church expressions in South Africa today, without offering a conclusive analysis.

The *mainstream denominational church* in many *city centres* shifted from being all white in the 1980s and early 1990s, to becoming transitional churches in the 1990s – with some hopeful signs of learning how to become authentically inclusive and multi-racial – to, today, becoming predominantly black churches. Often these churches have become commuter churches failing to embrace local urban issues on their agenda.

The *mainstream denominational church in suburbs* have remained largely white, liturgically and otherwise, even if they became more multi-cultural. The occasional trickle of vernacular songs or prayers have not necessarily helped to transform the church at its core. The agendas of these churches mostly fail to reflect the urban struggle in its intensity and diversity.

The *mainstream denominational church in urban townships* remains a black church. There are often huge resource deficits in many of these churches, and resource-strong members have often left for suburban or city centre churches.

17 Ethekwini Living Legends, Bishop Rubin Phillip, (n.d.). <<http://ethekwinilivinglegends.com/portfolio-items/bishop-rubin-phillip/>>, retrieved 15 July 2018.

18 Christa Kuljian, *Sanctuary: How an Inner-city Church Spilled onto a Sidewalk* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2013); A. Saba, "Liberation theologian practices what he preaches", *Mail & Guardian* (24 March 2016).

19 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 80.

20 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80.

At one level, many members of such churches might themselves be extremely vulnerable, the church being a safe haven and (only) place of pastoral and other nurture. However, at another level, one has to interrogate whether the average mainstream denominational church in urban townships have done the hard work of developing appropriate (black) urban theologies, speaking concretely into the longings for liberation of the black masses; and standing vigorously in solidarity with movements that work for such liberation.

In the past, some such churches have shown deep solidarity with the struggles for liberation. And yet, are post-apartheid urban struggles such as the scourge of substance addiction, violence against women and children, or perpetual unemployment and homelessness, dealt with in sufficiently systematic and systemic ways by urban township churches today? Mangayi²¹ speaks of the contemporary urban township church as a potential asset of urban life. But this asset needs to be optimally acknowledged as such – mobilized, organized, and offered –if it is to be a liberating source for vulnerable urban township people and neighbourhoods.

Pentecostal and charismatic churches come in different forms, shapes and sizes. There are those that have become more mainstream and well-established in the South African ecumenical landscape, ranging from more conservative to rather progressive, socio-theologically. They are scattered across the urban landscape, and might or might not engage urban issues intentionally. There are smaller and emerging expressions that combine charismatic or Pentecostal spirituality with a strong commitment to social justice, in some cases very deliberately discerning an urban agenda. Molobi²² offers an insightful account of how some Pentecostal churches in urban townships really provide empowering spaces to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

There is also a proliferation of small, storefront churches in inner city areas or urban informal settlements, usually independent, entrepreneurial, and to differing degrees engaging the broader ecumenical church in the city. That they are located in struggling urban areas, is often coincidence or a matter of affordability rather than choice. And yet, the presence of these churches also contribute, often unintentionally, to a unique sense of urban place-making.²³ In addition, many of these churches – being migrant churches themselves – provide a spiritual home

21 L. Mangayi, "Mission in an African city: discovering the township church as an asset towards local economic development in Tshwane" (Pretoria: University of South Africa, Unpublished DTh thesis, 2016).

22 Victor Molobi, "Living in the townships: an appraisal of Pentecostal social ministry in Tshwane", *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 70 (3), (2014), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2791>>.

23 M. Ribbens & S.F. De Beer, 2017, "Churches claiming a right to the city? Lived urbanisms in the City of Tshwane", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), (2017) a4690, <<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4690>>.

to transnational migrants who otherwise might feel themselves utterly isolated.²⁴

In recent years, sadly, the integrity of independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches has been compromised by notorious examples of charlatan theologians using dubious methods to attract members and money, with false promises of hope.²⁵ In cities there is a spectrum of such churches practising prosperity theologies, often preying on the urban poor, but also capitalizing on the middle-class aspirations of the new professional classes, equating Christ and capital.

Urban centres also host most of the larger *mega-churches* that could come in the form of single congregations, churches with multiple campuses in the same city, or sometimes the same church, ‘franchised’ in different urban centres across the country. Such churches could differ substantially in terms of theology, spirituality, demographic representation, or engagement with issues of social transformation or justice in the broadest sense of the word. The Christian Revival Centre (Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Nelspruit), Grace Bible Church (Johannesburg), Rivers Church (Sandton), Common Ground (Cape Town) or Moreleta Park Dutch Reformed Church (Pretoria) are all examples of mega-churches in urban centres, but cannot be painted with one broad stroke.

African Initiated Churches (AICs) span the urban and rural landscape in South Africa. In cities like Pretoria, these indigenous expressions of Christianity are often making innovative use of urban public spaces, at strategic access points to the city, in natural urban spaces under trees or next to streams, but also worshipping in physical structures, often in poorer urban areas. Being the fastest growing churches in South Africa today, they often remain marginal, socially and economically,²⁶ but also theologically and institutionally. And yet, Öhlmann and Gräb²⁷ assert the enormous potential of AICs as agents of community development.

Apart from the church as worshipping community, *faith-based organizations (FBOs)* are working in urban areas in response to socio-economic challenges, in some urban neighbourhoods being the only or most significant agents of community development. Such FBOs might be denominational, ecumenical or independent, but what distinguishes them from other non-profit organizations, is their overt faith-based orientation. Swart²⁸ illustrates how such organizations

24 W. Renkin, “Responses to migration: Tensions and ambiguities of churches in Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), (2017), a4725. <<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4725>>.

25 G. Mhlungu, “The rise and rise of the charismatic church”, *City Press* (27 March 2016).

26 P. Öhlmann, M-L. Frost & W. Gräb, “African Initiated Churches’ potential as development actors”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), (2016), a3825. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3825>>.

27 Öhlmann, Frost & Gräb, “African Initiated Churches’ potential as development actors”, 2016.

28 Ignatius Swart, *The church and the Development Debate: Perspectives on a Fourth Generation Approach* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2006).

mostly engage development in the form of relief or community development activities. According to Swart the church, or FBOs, mostly fail to contribute to advocacy, policy or social justice agendas, and almost never participate in local or global social movements, aimed at deeper transformational change at systemic levels.

One could indeed interrogate in how far diverse expressions described above, correlate with Cone's description of a black church, and in how far – even where the majority of members happen to be black people – many of these rather remain expressions of dominant, Western ecclesiological constructs, exported uncritically into local urban contexts.

The white church in the city

Let me for a moment turn to the “white church”. It is sad that – in general terms – we still need to speak of a white church and a black church (literally, in terms of skin colour) in the South African context. Our racial and economic captivities have not been adequately confronted and transformed after 1994. The rainbow has always been a myth, but especially so in most mainstream churches. When urban neighbourhoods changed from white to black, most white people moved away, and most white churches closed their doors, failing to adapt to urban change.

For as long as white churches leave neighbourhoods that have become predominantly black, racism persists. For as long as white students of theology assume that one day they too will serve white only congregations (or black students black congregations) racism persists. One can say that two of the most untransformed spaces in South Africa today are so-called Model C schools (public schools that were previously all white)²⁹ and white suburban churches. Here our cultural captivity tends to overrule our spiritual or faith commitments to participate in a transformed reality. These are the last bastions where white power and privilege can continue unchallenged, or so people think. We hide our subtle white superiority behind language and other debates, to make sure we can continue to perpetuate our comfortable positions of power and privilege.

Cone says: “Racism has been a part of the life of the church so long that it is virtually impossible for even the “good” members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the church”.³⁰ The departure of white churches from predominantly black areas are not considered by the white church to be a possible expression of racism. In fact, says Cone:

With its all-white congregations, it makes racism a respectable attitude. By remaining

29 R. Southall, “Race and class still define our schools”, *Mail & Guardian*, (11 March 2016).

30 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 72.

silent it creates an ethos which dehumanized blacks. It is the Church which preaches that blacks are inferior to whites – if not by word, certainly by ‘moral’ example”.³¹

Cone would probably have said the departure of whites and white institutions from neighbourhoods that became black, is to preach white superiority, “if not by word, certainly by... example”.³²

In relation to injustice and racism, Cone holds that “the Church, with the exception of a few isolated individuals, voices its condemnation in the style of resolutions that are usually equivocal and almost totally unproductive”.³³ Such a church probably moved beyond overt racism to a more liberal stance, articulating the right language but without necessarily being in solidarity with the oppressed. What he pleads for is a church that “should speak in a style which avoid abstractions”.³⁴ Their personal, political and congregational commitment should be coherent. In the context from which he wrote, it had to be expressed in incarnational solidarity with the struggles of oppressed (black) people.

In clinging to power, Jesus taught, we run the risk of losing everything. In letting go of exclusivist, superior power, we stand a chance of gaining our lives. This has become particularly true in urban neighbourhoods where (white) churches wanting to cling to traditional self-identities, often had to close their doors, whilst those churches willing to explore and embrace a more inclusive identify, found exciting new ways of being church and human, together. There are some exceptions of predominantly white churches engaging deeply with realities of urban suffering through their budgets, people and preaching.

The black church in the city

Cone says that much has been said about “the oppressive character of the white church”,³⁵ but if such criticism is not also applied to the black church, it “is hypocritical and serves for a camouflage of our own shortcomings and sins”.³⁶ He then raises serious, self-critical questions: “(W)hen does the black church’s actions deny its faith? What are the activities in our churches that should not only be rejected as unchristian but also exposed as demonic? What are the evils in our church and community that we should commit ourselves to destroy?”³⁷

31 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74.

32 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74.

33 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80.

34 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80.

35 James Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where do We Go from Here?”, *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 27, No.2 (1977), 151.

36 Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church”, 151-152.

37 Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church”, 151.

The starting point in engaging these and other questions, had to be, in Cone's mind, "the development of a black frame of reference that many called 'black theology'".³⁸ Such a theology is at the same time a theology of liberation characterized by its "historical fight for justice."³⁹ For Cone this had to be the real yardstick for "the authenticity of our faith", but also the integrity of being church – our commitment to liberation. Cone said: "Either we mean what we say about liberation or we do not."⁴⁰

Once he established the yardstick by which to measure authenticity, he then applies that same yardstick to the black church in North America, with penetrating critique. Cone's reading of the black church was that it was more committed to the amounts of money raised for church buildings or pastors' anniversaries than to the fight for justice and liberation.⁴¹ The church actually became "a hindrance to black liberation, because black preachers and church members appear to be more concerned about their own institutional survival than the freedom of poor people in their communities".⁴² This he wrote in 1977, but it has become perhaps even truer today, also in the context of the black church in South Africa.

In addition, Cone suggests that the black church too often sought to be like the white church, and, in the process, rather than being agents of liberation in their communities, "rather, drained the community".⁴³ Based on this critique, he then called the black church to conversion: "to change their style and honour the suffering of the black masses, proclaiming the gospel of the black Christ".⁴⁴

By and large the urban church, whether white, black or mixed, have failed to engage urban South Africa in adequate, responsible ways. In the language of Cone, the urban church in South Africa, at large – even the black church – has seized to be black, because of its failure to be in deep, concrete solidarity with the perpetual oppression of black "non-persons".

The state of theological education: reproducing urban illiterates

I have described my own theological education between 1985 and 1991, and how the children of Sunnyside and the experience of inner city Chicago served to theologically re-educate me. The largely white, suburban theology that I was taught, never incarnated itself properly in the changing urban contexts of South

38 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 150.

39 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 152.

40 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 152.

41 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 152.

42 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 152.

43 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 114.

44 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 114.

African cities. The real question is whether the state of theological education today is much different.

Cone raised this as a great challenge already in 1969, and, disturbingly, his challenge seems to be as relevant almost 50 years later. Cone said, way back then,

The seminaries in America are probably the most obvious sign of the irrelevance of theology to life. Their initiative in responding to the crisis of black people in America is virtually unnoticeable. Their curriculum generally is designed for young white men and women who are preparing to serve all-white churches.⁴⁵

Even if 60-70% of the student population in a school of theology are black, the dominant discourse might still be couched in the language of white theology, white theologians and white churches, especially if the majority of lecturers represent white locations.

Although Cone argued that there are helpful European theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer, who “may serve as examples of how to relate theology to life”, their validity remained limited as they could not be helpful “in defining our major issues”.⁴⁶ In every generation and every context, a people need to construct their own theologies in response to defining their own major issues. In every context people need to ask anew, what will the good news look like, concretely so, in our specific reality.

Cone spoke of conditions of revolution in the United States, to which the white church was dumb-founded. In the 1980s when black communities were burning, we were trained in a theology that was completely disconnected. Boesak spoke of “(t)he active cooperation of Christian theology on the one hand and the appalling silence and indifference on the other”,⁴⁷ in relation to first black slavery and then apartheid.

The pertinent question today becomes: could it be that we are in a new stage of revolution, marked by growing urban protest in communities across the South African landscape, and are we, once again, dead silent as a church and as institutions doing theological education? Could it be that history simply repeats itself, and that our lack of both prophetic discernment of the signs of the times, as well as prophetic naming of that which deals death today, would be held against us in future?

Cone, from a black perspective, asked this very simple but provocative question: “Could a black man hope that there are still others who, as theologians, will join the oppressed in their fight for freedom?”⁴⁸ I translate this as asking,

45 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 114.

46 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 88.

47 Allan A. Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence. A Socio-ethical Study on Black theology and Black Power*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1976), 34.

48 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 89.

“Could an oppressed people, black or other for that matter, hope that there are theologians who will not intellectualize about human suffering, but will stand in concrete solidarity, in the trenches of such suffering, to resist death and injustice, and to declare life and fight for justice?”

Of course, this is a presumptuous question in itself, to think an oppressed people would have any expectation of theologians, because, why should theology be of any meaning to them; or, at least, our intellectual, abstract theologies? The understanding of theology in the worlds of the oppressed is never an abstraction, hidden behind securitized university walls, but a lived experience with a historical God, often infusing their only hope against all odds.

If our lecturers, curricula, and pedagogies, are not embedded in the realities of urban suffering today – and this is largely black urban suffering – we will continue to reproduce urban illiterates. The inherent urban literacy many (black) students enter schools of theology with, often gets depleted or domesticated, through theological abstractions failing to connect with students’ lived experiences. There is also an opportunity, through transformed pedagogical approaches, that place the lived experience of students at the centre, to build on such inherent urban literacy. Currently our pedagogies mostly do not allow for that.

On interlocution, ruptures and conversions

I started with an auto-ethnographic reflection, as without the experiences reflected there, I might not have come to a place of hearing or understanding the language and intention of James Cone. I would probably have been unready to face myself through the provocations of Cone, intellectually, had I not first had to face myself existentially: in the mirror of black children and white policemen and white courts; a black inner city neighbourhood in Chicago; and the immense warmth of hospitality extended to me by new black friends.

What these experiences did, was to facilitate an existential and epistemological rupture: existentially, I could no longer understand myself, my faith and my vocation as I have understood it before; and epistemologically, I had to recognize that what I knew was far removed from the lived experiences and felt knowledge of the majority of my fellow South Africans.

In the mirror of blackness, I was led into an expanded rationality, from merely intellectually knowing about justice, race and class, to now experiencing it emotionally and even physically. Suddenly, upon returning to South Africa from Chicago, at a deeply visceral level – in my deepest core – I knew what I knew, and that was that God was not neutral. And neither could I, the church or our theological education pretend to be neutral.

Vulnerable, black children became my interlocutors, helping me see, feel and

experience life from the other side. The right interlocutors will create the conditions required for the epistemological and theological rupture that is required, if we are to become appropriately engaged urban ministers, theologians and scholars, in solidarity with those who are oppressed and excluded, and against the powers of darkness that lure around every corner, and sometimes in the pews and pulpits of our churches.

Such solidarity, even for people of faith, does not come naturally, as it goes against the grain of our comfort. It requires guides, interpreters and companions (i.e. interlocutors), able to pierce through our (pseudo-) innocence.⁴⁹ It often means existential, epistemological and theological rupture, in my case caused by an experience of existential pain, loss, anger, and – simultaneously – discovery.

Cone said, in reference to Merleau-Ponty: “one does not become a revolutionary through science but through indignation”.⁵⁰ Those choosing justice choose so, not merely by an intellectual awakening, but through indignation, and, often, pain. I understand anger and pain as sources of either destruction or paralysis; or, if redeemed, as sources of radical new imaginations.

Problematizing interlocution

If our churches and institutions of theological education fail to choose as interlocutors those on the underside of society, we will remain shackled by constructs of faith and theology not relevant to our bigger context. And yet, the question of interlocution in itself should be problematized, as demonstrated by both Vellem⁵¹ and Maluleke⁵² in different reflections.

Historically, black liberation theology would consider the non-person as the interlocutor for doing theology and discerning God. Boesak said, “To be black in South Africa means to be classified as a ‘non-white’: a non-person, less than white and therefore less than human”.⁵³ However, in post-apartheid South Africa there has been huge shifts. The affirmative action and black economic empowerment discourses were no longer based “on the heritage of the liberation paradigm”⁵⁴ but skewed “to the requirements of big business in South Africa”.⁵⁵

49 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 4.

50 Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church”, 153.

51 Vuyani S. Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century: a Reflection”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae: Journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa*, (2012), 345-360.

52 Tinyiko Maluleke, “Do I, with my Excellent PhD, Still Need Affirmative Action? The Contribution of Black Theology to the Debate”, *Missionalia*, 24:3 (1996), 303-321.

53 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 26.

54 Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century”, 348.

55 Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century”, 348.

Maluleke, already more than 20 years ago, stated: “The lack of a clearly thought out, liberation-oriented and identifiable community of interlocutors in the AA (affirmative action) debate has tended to reduce it to a middle class talk-shop”.⁵⁶ Rural black women, street homeless people or the average young unemployed person living in an informal settlement, are not the interlocutors in this debate. Maluleke laments the shift from the poor non-person to the black middle class person, as the new interlocutor.⁵⁷

Both Vellem and Maluleke, from a black liberation theological perspective, question whether a black middle class person could be seen as “an authentic black interlocutor”,⁵⁸ as, in their view, middle-class blacks do not represent “the original understanding of blackness as interlocutor for Black Theology of liberation”.⁵⁹ Blackness in Black Theologies of liberation, refers to the non-person, “the memory of the miserable”,⁶⁰ those finding themselves in dehumanized conditions, on the outside looking in. This hardly refers to the black middle-class person.

On pseudo-innocence, conversions, and collective ownership

The ruptures I refer to above constitute conversion, but also calls for on-going, multiple conversions. For Cone “(I)t is not enough to be sorry or to admit wrong. To repent involves change in one’s whole being. In the Christian perspective, it means conversion”.⁶¹ The ruptures mediated by interlocutors and experiences such as I described earlier, requires a commitment to locate oneself anew, epistemologically, theologically, but even physically.

Perhaps one of the great mistakes of post-1994 South Africa, is the assumption that – miraculously, without any ruptures or conversions, white South Africans have dealt with or repented of racism, and their complicity in or silence about apartheid wrong-doings.

Without deep conversion experiences, usually mediated by the right interlocutors and occurring in the form of decisive ruptures, individuals and institutions will remain with what Boesak speaks of as “pseudo-innocence”: that which “blocks of all awareness and therefore the sense of responsibility necessary to confront the other as human being”.⁶² Such pseudo-innocence “leads to an

56 Maluleke, “Do I, with my Excellent PhD, Still Need Affirmative Action?”, 316.

57 Maluleke, “Do I, with my Excellent PhD, Still Need Affirmative Action?”, 316.

58 Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century”, 348.

59 Vellem, “Interlocution and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st Century”, 348.

60 Wuyani S. Vellem, “Unshackling the Church”, *HTS Theological Studies*, 71(3), Art.#3119, 5 pages, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.3119>>, (2015).

61 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 81.

62 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 4.

inability to repent”, but, insists Boesak, is necessary to sustain the status quo and preserve privilege, whilst presenting a façade of being reconciled.

Kritzinger speaks of the necessity of conversion, which, he elsewhere proposes, implies the re-evangelization of the (white) church.⁶³ This implied “that something went seriously wrong in the evangelisation of the white community until now”.⁶⁴ Black theology also called for black people to be re-evangelized, which would mean “self-acceptance... as created in the image of God” and “committing themselves to the struggle for justice”.⁶⁵

Only once such conversion, re-evangelization or re-education occurs, often mediated by ruptures in a false sense of innocence, and an invitation into a new kind of consciousness, can it become possible to discern collective ownership.

The white liberal is confronted, says Boesak, in that s/he can no longer do things for blacks but are invited to discern what the oppressed are doing for themselves, and then to be in solidarity with that.⁶⁶ At the same time, their task should be that of advancing similar liberation in their own white communities. What Boesak does, similar to Cone or Kritzinger, is not only to expose the liberal for their pseudo-innocence, but also to invite them to go beyond doing things for people, into a place of deep solidarity. This is the distinction between the liberal, on the one hand, and the radical or liberationist, on the other. Collective ownership – theologically, psychologically and practically – for societal challenges would become a point of departure for collective action in the direction of deep liberation / transformation. Through collective action, prophetic signs of radical collective ownership in a concrete economic sense – in how land, property and resources are shared or redistributed – will start to emerge.

The innocence Boesak speaks of, also has implications for blacks. He speaks of how conditions of oppression can breed a certain mentality, making “a virtue out of powerlessness, weakness, and helplessness”,⁶⁷ even if now one finds oneself in a position of power or privilege. An affirmation of one’s personhood – a new consciousness – is a powerful act that constitutes a farewell to innocence,⁶⁸ and, now, also an acknowledgment of complicity in on-going suffering.

63 J.N.J. (Klippias) Kritzinger, “Re-evangelising the White Church”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 76 (September 1991), 106–116.

64 Kritzinger, “Re-evangelising the White Church”, 107.

65 G.J.C. Van Wyngaard, “White Theology in Dialogue with Black Theology: Exploring the Contribution of Klippias Kritzinger”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 72 (1), a3033, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3033>>, (2016); J.N.J. (Klippias) Kritzinger, *Black Theology: A Challenge to Mission*, (Pretoria: Unpublished DTh thesis, University of South Africa, 1988).

66 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 5.

67 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 3.

68 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 6.

Part 3: A Radical New Imagination: Theological (Re)Education towards Being an (Urban) Church of the oppressed

Beyond abstractions: concrete theology and spirituality

It is the contention of this article that much of liberal theology tends to fall into abstractions, that fail to engage in embodied ways with concrete urban struggles.

For both Cone and Gutierrez, God's intervention and participation in history is a concrete and liberating participation. Cone said:⁶⁹ "the knowledge of God is neither mystical communion nor abstract rational thought; rather, it is recognizing divine activity in human history through faith".⁷⁰ The task of black theology is to redefine "all religious and nonreligious forms of thought... in the light of the liberation of the oppressed".⁷¹ Cone goes even further, emphasizing the centrality of Christ's incarnation as taking upon himself "the oppressed condition" in order to mediate human liberation so all humanity can be what God intended for them.⁷²

Theology is concrete contextual engagement in and with the contemporary historical struggles of people. Boesak writes that theology "begins with the experience of the actual struggles, suffering and joys of particular communities".⁷³ Such theology is not "detached, cool, objective, or neutral", but is "passionately involved". In the case of black people in urban informal settlements, or LGBTIQ+ communities, or first nation people of Canada, or girl children trafficked for commercial sex in Thailand, theology would begin in the actual sufferings and joys of those communities.

Theology done without deep engagement in the actual lived experiences of the contexts in which it is done, is abstract theology, creating impotency. The locatedness of our theological schools – theoretically, intellectually, but also physically, existentially and in terms of solidarity – therefore needs to be interrogated. Similarly, the locatedness of the urban church needs to be questioned, in terms of its proximity to urban struggle, its solidarity with those struggles, and the ways in which it peddles other-worldly spiritualities or mediates concrete and multiple freedoms, in close collaboration with concrete local communities.

69 James H. Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church: a historical-theological interpretation", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 387, *The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion* (January 1970), 49-55.

70 Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church", 51.

71 Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church", 52-53.

72 Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church", 52.

73 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 12.

Re-educating theology: recovering the gift of black, liberation and other contextual theologies

Klippies Kritzinger⁷⁴ wrote that white theologians typically dealt with black consciousness or black theology by ignoring it. One can hardly imagine that, in 2018, in a country that is predominantly black, the insights and articulations of black theology and black consciousness remain absent from most dominant white theological discourse. Without such insights, doing theology responsibly in the contexts we find ourselves in, seems almost impossible. Black theological insights can help to explain much of the current outpouring of anger and unresolved pain; if only we chose our interlocutors right.

There is a sense in which theology, as it is practised at mainstream public universities, need to undergo a process of re-education. The contextual cries emerging from marginal urban communities, and the cry for decolonial, transformed education recently coming from students across our country, demand such re-education. What is as lacking as in the 1980s is articulate, bold and consistent prophetic theologies, practised by church denominations, local churches or schools of theology. Instead, prophetic theology remains the preserve of a few marginal scholars, church activists or pastors. It seems as if the boldest prophecies today come from social movements emerging in response to many socio-economic challenges, in communities all across the country. The modern-day prophets are people like S'bu Zikode of Abahlali base Mjondolo, the domestic workers in Sea Point leading a chapter of "Reclaim the city", or the young activists of the Social Justice Coalition in Khayelitsha. We would do well to heed to their prophetic voices.

Since the bias of this paper is a deep discomfort with the status quo, and suspicion of church theology, it suggests the radical re-education of theology itself, with the help of black, liberation, womanist, feminist, queer and other contextual theologies. It suggests our collective and on-going theological re-education as people preaching in pulpits and teaching students, if our education is to "lead out" from captivity to freedom.

The problem of liberal theological education

The problem with liberal theological education is its failure to choose sides. It seldom shows solidarity, except with that which protects its own comfort. Cone describes the liberal as one who "wants change without risk, victory without blood".⁷⁵ Resisting any form of "extremism", as many urban struggles might

74 J.N.J. (Klippies) Kritzinger, "Liberating whiteness: Engaging with the anti-racist dialectics of Steve Biko", <<http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/4326/Kritzinger.pdf>>, (2008).

75 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 27.

be framed by the liberal, is more important to the liberal than resisting the institutional or systemic violence that creates the fertile soil for urban struggle and “extremism” to start with. This resembles the church theology described in the *Kairos Document*,⁷⁶ which only offered “limited, guarded and cautious” critique of apartheid, superficial and tentative in relation to the severity of the crisis. It is precisely such a theology that, when faced with the present crisis in South Africa, leaves so many Christians and Church leaders in a state of near paralysis.

My reading is that the state theology of theological schools at public universities and in the larger white Afrikaans-speaking churches today made way for a church theology, speaking cautiously and softly, if it speaks at all.

The liberal white, says Cone, “is a strange creature; he verbalizes the right things. He intellectualizes on the racial problem beautifully”.⁷⁷ And yet, the racial problem is not “their” problem, even if they benefit from it. When the liberal, occasionally, allow themselves to be outraged at what they see as wrong, Cone⁷⁸ suggests they then want to ‘help’ without their own comforts being compromised. Their commitment, even if offered in the form of finances or voluntary service, is still done by sitting on the fence, not taking sides, hardly asking about the causes of the suffering they see, or, if they are able to discern the cause, not wanting to ruffle feathers, as it would impinge on their own situation.

Today, even faster than imagined, a liberal black middle-class and elite has emerged, that runs exactly the same risk of wanting change without sacrificing comfort. Many local congregations of mainstream denominational churches, both black and white, practice a new form of state theology, similar to many Pentecostal, charismatic or African initiated churches, expressed in uncritical support of the ruling party. Apartheid and colonialism’s racist legacies are today combining with the collusion between a black government and neoliberal capital, which intensifies the struggle for the non-person, mostly – although not exclusively – the urban and rural poor, and predominantly black.

Cone said: “Black people know who the enemy is, and they are forcing the liberal to take sides”.⁷⁹ Whether the black “non-person”, in Boesak’s definition, can still know who the enemy is, and whether the enemy comes only in the form of white capital, need to be contested. Biko,⁸⁰ of course, insisted to speak of non-whites as those blacks aspiring for whiteness, void of a clear and committed black consciousness. The combination of non-whites, in the Bikoist sense, white

76 The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: a Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986).

77 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 27.

78 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 27.

79 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 27.

80 Steve Biko, *I Write what I Like*, (London: Heinemann, 1978), 52.

racism, government corruption, neoliberal capital, flourishing church theologies, and liberal theological education, today only spells one thing for the poor masses: death.

In a context where the overwhelming odds are against the poor, sides need to be taken.

Taking sides

We need our theologies to be re-educated with the help of those theologies that were violently marginalized and epistemicized. If we are serious about engaging the margins, not only as phrases in mission statements but through concrete actions in solidarity, we need to read black, liberation and womanist theologies; and allow such theologies to read us.

Engaging these theological constructs intellectually only, would not facilitate the ruptures or re-education we today require. We need to be read by those who are poor and homeless and hopeless – those for whom affirmative action policies or debates about land expropriation did not result in access, freedom or hope. They need to read us, our churches and our models of theological education to help us see how impotent our grand constructs have become, in the face of their struggles. And we can only be read by them, if we are close enough.

In this regard Cone's challenge is valuable. Cone says: "To study theology from the perspective of Black Theology means casting one's mental and emotional faculties with the lot of the oppressed so that they may learn the cause and the cure of their humiliation".⁸¹ Cone asserts that only a "ghetto theology", a theology which speaks to black people,⁸² holds the promise of life. Unless the theologies we construct together in public universities in 2018 are "ghetto theologies", speaking to those living in vast urban informal settlements, or slum housing, with little signs of a better future soon, our theologies hold little promise for the urban dwellers of such settlements – "it is a lifeless message".⁸³

In considering the spaces where theological education occurs at public universities in South Africa, one needs to ask: Whose spaces are these? Whose location, whose definition and whose consciousness determine the agenda, the curriculum and the pedagogical commitments?

For as long as our theologies are permeated by white European thought, void of the lived experiences of the majority of South Africans, they would remain neutral, liberal, unjust, and therefore death-dealing.

81 Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church", 53.

82 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 32.

83 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 32.

Black consciousness and black theology could assist in challenging “white people’s definition of Christianity”,⁸⁴ instead inviting self-definition – personally, communally and also theologically. Biko said it like this: “we felt the need to explain ourselves and to be understood from our own vantage point and not from the perspective and experiences of whites”.⁸⁵

In theological spaces this becomes contested terrain. The desire and insistence of self-definition, as practised by proponents of black consciousness and black theology, easily clash with historical power constructs, vested denominational interests, or dominant theological positions, void of such a consciousness. The question becomes whether so-called integrated spaces in schools of theology at public universities in South Africa, merely co-opt people into whiteness, or whether a new and radically inclusive ethos and consciousness are shaped collectively.

Cone says: “the power of definition is a prerogative the oppressor never wants to give up”.⁸⁶ And yet, in every new generation, when black consciousness is embraced afresh by a younger generation of people, there is a new insistence on self-definition and reclamation of that which has been lost. It is often when such assertion happens, that hidden racism surfaces. Cone speaks of how racism gets masked until resistance breaks out: “When blacks retreat and accept their dehumanized place in white society, the conflict ceases. But when blacks rise up in freedom, whites show their racism”.⁸⁷ When the protests on South African university campuses erupted, many academics ascribed the protests to a third force. Many others, often a younger generation, simply would not take sides. The liberal university, and schools of theology, would rather that vulnerable people remain excluded, than to take sides which might compromise positions of, or proximity to, power.

The gift of black theology to our institutions of theological education, could be to help grow a collective understanding of victimhood and oppression, whilst at the same time fostering a collective, new and liberationist consciousness, resisting the violation of humanity in any form.⁸⁸ The kind of theology imagined here is not merely relevant in its nicely crafted theological articulations, but is expressed in deep, clear and concrete solidarity.

84 Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church”, 148.

85 Biko, *I Write what I Like*, 149.

86 Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church”, 149.

87 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 26.

88 Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church”, 50.

Schools of prophets

What is called for here, is not for liberal church theologies, but for radical prophetic theologies. For Cone, there was no place for liberals in the struggle for freedom from oppression, simply because a liberal stance, bathed in neutrality, lack what it takes to mediate revolutionary change. For Cone “there are places... for ‘radicals’... white and black, who are prepared to risk life for freedom... who hate evil and refuse to tolerate it anywhere”.⁸⁹

As a result of theological re-education, theological work at public universities in South Africa should by definition be prophetic theology, standing with the oppressed, mediating epistemological ruptures, encouraging existential and locational displacement, facing ourselves in the face of the other, whilst learning to articulate the claims of liberation Jesus announced in his inaugural sermon.

This work should no longer be left for the few “radicals” on the margins of our theological institutions. This should be the prophetic, contextual and liberating theologies that in every new generation would discern, in the light of the Word of God, what forms oppression is taking, who the oppressed or oppressors are, and how Christ – in that new context – comes to us through the oppressed.

Theological education that is unable to discern that which deals death is unworthy to be taught, not only at public universities, but anywhere.

Church of the Oppressed

For Cone, “(T)he church is that community which refuses to accept things as they are and rebels endlessly against the humiliation and oppression of man (sic)”.⁹⁰ If this is indeed what the church is, one can rightly ask in how far the average institutional church community in urban South Africa is authentically church. Cone said of white and black churches in the US:

Both have marked out their places as havens of retreat, the one to cover the guilt of the oppressor, the other to daub the wounds of the oppressed. Neither is notably identified with the tearing-healing power of Christ. Neither is a fit instrument of revolution.⁹¹

In contemporary South African churches, hearing the language of liberation is rare in the white but even the black church, as we largely practice a domesticated or escapist faith.

⁸⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 28.

⁹⁰ Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church”, 53.

⁹¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 115.

If blackness is defined by Cone as “sharing in the condition of those who are oppressed and participating in their liberation”,⁹² then clearly today not all black churches can assume to be black any longer.

There seems to be enough evidence that though one’s skin is black, the heart may be lily white. The real questions are: Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it lie with the oppressed black or with the white oppressor?”⁹³

For Cone,⁹⁴ the black church failing to recognize this and making a commitment to participate in the liberation of the oppression, would be harshly judged.

Today, if we use “black” and “white” not in the sense of pigmentation but of consciousness, the black church in South Africa might not be so black any longer, and some mixed-race faith communities, siding with the oppressed where they are, might have embraced Cone’s black Christ. For Cone, “(i)t is not possible to be for Christ and not be for his people, the oppressed and unwanted in society”.⁹⁵

It is a matter of choice. Just as “(w)hite theology and the white segregated church could never give the answers to the urgent existential questions of black people”⁹⁶, similarly the black middle-class of Biko, or the post- civil rights black church of Cone, have lost their ability to be the right interlocutors for understanding black oppression. For Cone⁹⁷, both white and black church “have taken the road marked ‘the good life’, avoiding the call to discipleship, which is the call to suffering and death”.⁹⁸

Central in Cone’s theology is an insistence on radical discipleship which, for him, meant solidarity with Christ in the oppressed. For Cone a church, not driven by the liberation of the (black) oppressed, or by goals expressed in a new humanity, has ceased to be church.⁹⁹ Cone insists that “the church of the Oppressed One must be... a community that is totally identified with the goal of all oppressed people as symbolized in the condition of black people”.¹⁰⁰ For him, a church deeply moved by Christ and longing to follow Christ, “must go where suffering is and become black also”.¹⁰¹ Where do we have to go, and be, today?

92 Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church”, 55.

93 Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church”, 152.

94 Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church”, 55.

95 Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church”, 53.

96 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 38.

97 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 115.

98 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 115.

99 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 115.

100 Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church”, 53.

101 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 69.

Liberation Towards a New Humanity: the Call to Take a Stand

Cone's black theology was not an exclusivist or anti-white theology as detractors would want to make it out to be, or as it could be perceived on the surface. The freedom sought by Cone was a freedom for all peoples, both black and white.

Black Theology is a passionate call to freedom, and although it directs its voice to black people, it nonetheless hopes that white people will hear and be saved.¹⁰²

Cone's longing is for the transformation of humanity and the whole world. His challenge was to go beyond reactive theology, or, even more specifically, beyond "a mere reaction to white racism", and to start outline an imagination for "a new socially constructed humanity for the whole inhabited world".¹⁰³ Although his own point of departure is the black experience of struggle, he argues that the struggles for justice of black people should connect to the struggles for justice of all oppressed people "so that together all the victims of the world might take charge of their history for the creation of a new humanity".¹⁰⁴

This would require more thorough socio-theological analysis and imagination of a society in which all relationships would fall within the scope of a liberationist commitment to collective freedom and a new humanity.

Jesus modelled a new way of living, disrupting the status quo and insisting on a different way of being human, together. Biko's quest was for a true humanity. Cone pleaded for the same. Unless urban churches and theological education in South Africa take a clear stand, to be with the oppressed whoever they might be, concretely so, we will be unable to mediate the kinds of freedom and humanity envisaged by Jesus, Biko or Cone. From places of neutrality we might very well speak liberally, but, ultimately, will be judged by our actions.

102 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 16.

103 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 153.

104 Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church", 153.

License and Permissible Use Notice

These materials are provided to you by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) in accordance with the terms of ATLA's agreements with the copyright holder or authorized distributor of the materials, as applicable. In some cases, ATLA may be the copyright holder of these materials.

You may download, print, and share these materials for your individual use as may be permitted by the applicable agreements among the copyright holder, distributors, licensors, licensees, and users of these materials (including, for example, any agreements entered into by the institution or other organization from which you obtained these materials) and in accordance with the fair use principles of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. You may not, for example, copy or email these materials to multiple web sites or publicly post, distribute for commercial purposes, modify, or create derivative works of these materials without the copyright holder's express prior written permission.

Please contact the copyright holder if you would like to request permission to use these materials, or any part of these materials, in any manner or for any use not permitted by the agreements described above or the fair use provisions of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. For information regarding the identity of the copyright holder, refer to the copyright information in these materials, if available, or contact ATLA at products@atla.com.

Except as otherwise specified, Copyright © 2016 American Theological Library Association.