

Racism, whiteness and transformation: reforming the space of theological education in South Africa

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As practical theologians, we are interested in the critical process of action and reflection with respect to how oppressive practices, theories and forms of knowledge are constructed and enacted in an increasingly diverse and uneven world. In South Africa, race, ethnicity and national identity are important discussions that remain unfinished ecclesial business for churches and theological education alike. In considering how to reform space, body and politics, this chapter unpacks a research project on diversity, highlighting the embedded racism found within the sampled institutions enabled by whiteness and power discourses of resistance. Using a post-colonial lens, it underlines the challenge in unequal relationships of dominance, resistance and change in theological education and the need to recognize this complicity and to reflect on and act against embedded racism. Transformative remedies are required with a vision of inclusion that will positively impact students, identity and transformation.

Introduction

When we look at the role of religion, theology and churches in colonial history, the question as to how theological education produces and reproduces a colonial mentality of domination is an extremely significant issue to wrestle with. This chapter discusses the findings of an ethnographic study that attempts to understand the critical role of a theological institution's culture in relation to diversity and suggests that reform is urgently needed to overcome the status quo if theological education is to have credibility. This is in line with the "reforming" theme of this book and the need to confront spaces of oppression and injustice, to decolonize harmful patterns of relating to others and to affirm the equal dignity of persons.

In South Africa, how best to deal with the challenges of race, ethnicity and national identity are important, yet unfinished, discussions for churches. South African society is a long way from reflecting a "normal" society with its deep social divisions, while the diversity of the population remains largely

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untapped as a resource; it is more often seen as a source of difficulty (Booyesen et al. 2007, 1). The "internalization of apartheid stereotypes, structures and beliefs has resulted in degrees of resistance and rigidity and low levels of adaptability of the individual or groups to the changing South African environment and its new value system" (Cross and Naidoo 2012, 228). Johnathan Jansen calls this "bitter knowledge"; it represents "how people remember and enact the past" (2009, 5). Despite major changes in the formal institutions of democracy, these "messages" have not been interrupted over the period of transition. They take place in a context of growing intolerance, with the lack of a "consolidated identity as one of the most worrying South African realities"



(Brunsdon 2017, 1). According to the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, the pace of progress to attain nation formation and social cohesion will “require further theorisation because of the persistent nature of race-based exclusions and inequalities across several indicators” (2014, 210).

The transition from apartheid to a more democratic society was based on the restoration of a moral human community. Many leaders emphasized that forgiveness and reconciliation “require coming to terms with the past, not attempting to forget or repress it” (Van der Merwe 2003, 282). In playing their part, churches have reconceptualized their role in society (Kuperus 2011, 279) and restructured racially diverse sections of the various denominations. This has resulted in changes to theological education, with growing multicultural student bodies reflecting diversity of all kinds. Theological institutions educate students for service in a democratic and pluralistic society and need to confront the issues of diversity, even though it is a challenging and often divisive task. However, the way diversity has been approached by Christian communities has not been productive in bringing about dialogue on the topic. These issues are theologically complicated and contested, as they are sometimes attached to religious dogma, making it a challenge to implement them. When communities do reflect greater diversity, there is always a risk of embracing an uncritical kind of cohesion without deconstructing dominant constructs that continue to perpetuate inequality.

The aim of exploring diversity within theological education is to look at the ways in which difference was constructed, how it was operationalized in institutions and why difference continues to matter. It involves learning “how diverse constituencies use power to control and shape the agenda of theological education and its mission” (Gilligan 2002, 9). Pierre Bourdieu (1977) refers to “the said, the unsaid, the unsayable” in reflecting on power in discourse. Froehle and colleagues (2015, 21) acknowledge the “unsayable” in theological education as a heretical discourse, which is important to consider since, in providing education within a context of diversity, some have benefited from and others have been harmed by the existing arrangements of power. The lens of colonial difference in institutions has not always been named or given the attention it deserves. Colonial difference is a reference to the spaces—the borders and peripheries of empire that have suffered the negative consequences of modernity (Mignolo 2000, 49–88).

Postcolonial theory has paid special attention to the hurtful memories of those who have been marginalized and oppressed by the despoilment of their cultures. Religion was used to justify oppression, colonialism and apartheid. As a political theology, religion helped shape the social order, making possible certain types of institutional arrangements and not others, in the process producing or redirecting culture (Goldberg 2009, 534). People can construct, justify and disseminate the colonial mentality. Androas reminds us that cultural colonisation, “which involves colonised minds and education systems”, is a deeper and long-lasting form of colonial power (2012, 5). This form of power is more subtle and more difficult to identify, resist and transform.

The lens of postcolonial theory is helpful, as it not only reveals the complicity of the Christian missionary enterprise with the structures of colonialism, but also highlights the need to recognize this complicity for the sake of transformation. It helps one to see how knowledge production and reproduction and “truth claims” are inextricably linked with the hegemonic power that “maintains the present asymmetrical global relations” (Kang 2010, 31). The central questions from a post-colonial perspective are as follows: Who is seen and who is made invisible in these communities? Whose reality counts? (Chambers 1997). Practical theology needs to become involved in these kinds of questions, exposing the grand narratives that glorify inequality and hide colonizing patterns of relating to one another.

Diversity research project (2013–2015)

The study aimed to understand diversity management within the institutional culture, to understand how these interactions formed and prepared future ministers (Naidoo 2016). In addition, it was useful to establish whether theological institutions responded differently and exhibited distinct cultures in dealing with diversity. Diversity management entails a “proactive, inclusive and relatively contemporary approach to dealing with cultural differences in organizations” (Fubara et al. 2011, 114). The point of highlighting difference is to show the hidden values and norms that need to be thoroughly articulated, analyzed, evaluated, deconstructed and reconstituted (Steyn 2011, 4) so as to create equitable institutional cultures. At the same time, it was important to understanding the underlying theological criteria behind these assumptions and conceptualizations.



The theoretical framework of this research project was based on culture (Geertz 1973), which Swindler (1986, 273) extends by emphasizing that culture includes shared practices and ideas, interpreting it as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals and worldviews that provide the cultural components that people use to construct “strategies of action”. Within institutional culture, students are shaped by diversity and are socialized in how to respond to diversity. In conducting an analysis of culture, theological institutions should provide reasons for its beliefs and actions, its orientating action towards a certain normative goal.

The methodological approach used was critical ethnography, which attempts to expose the hidden agendas and describe the power relations at play (O Reilly 2009, 55). To understand the role of institutional culture, special focus was placed on a campus climate framework (Hurtado et al. 1998) focused on compositional diversity, behavioural and psychological dimensions, and the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion within an institution. The sample involved two private residential Protestant training institutions, one from each of the dominant Christian traditions in South Africa, namely the independent tradition made up of Pentecostals, Charismatics and the African Independent/Initiated Churches and the so-called mainline traditions involving Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans and other established historic mission churches. These selected institutions had very different intellectual, religious and social worlds and served as the official training centers of their respective church traditions. Data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork over a two-year period. An equal amount of time was spent at each institution conducting interviews with student and staff, engaging in participant observation and reviewing institutional documents. The idea was to let the formative process unfold and watch students and staff as they experienced and negotiated their institution’s culture. Thematic analysis revealed emergent patterns, which were reflected on using critical discourse theory (Wodak and Chilton 2005).

Research findings

In summary, the two ethnographies revealed very different institutional cultures shaped over time by their mission, history, context and location (Naidoo 2016, 5). In the sampled independent/Charismatic

college, there was a disengaged stance towards diversity initiatives; there was a “sharing of spiritual values” but little sharing of cultural values, with a color-blind theology in place. In this institution, the “biblical worldview” and an individual’s relationship with God were given ultimate importance. Cultural differences in how people think and live out their faith were not emphasized, and diversity initiatives were viewed as being part of a ‘liberal political’ agenda. In the sampled mainline college, there was more of an awareness of diversity, as they see themselves “as agents in the transformation of society”. However, this taken-for-granted stance and the rhetoric of diversity within the institution was not interrogated in practice. Diversity initiatives were not structured or aligned throughout the life of the college, with little capacity by staff to facilitate issues. Even though an awareness of diversity was seen as important, the relational dimensions were superficial, with a lack of real community, as the formative structures were not working. This was aggravated by the hierarchical nature of the tradition and the authoritarian style of management, which resulted in a culture of silence amongst staff and students. Interestingly, the findings from both sampled colleges reflected mostly on race and gender (Naidoo 2016, 7), while the absence of discourse on the other dimensions of diversity highlighted how little awareness there is of how entrenched the norms are, resulting in a virtual invisibility of any contestation of identity.

In both sampled institutions, there was no formal policy or interventions in place with respect to diversity. Instead, institutions adhered to the politically correct stance of non-racism, non-sexism and equal treatment of all within their respective institutions (Naidoo 2016). There were some modules and activities in place on self-awareness, cross-cultural learning and formational interventions. Importantly, diversity issues were not positively linked to ministerial identity formation in a way that would make a significant difference. Even though students were highly committed to racial justice, there were a lack of open spaces within the institutions to dialogue on issues of diversity. Students were afraid to speak because of the fear of being victimized or jeopardizing their chances for ordination. Both sampled institutions were not in possession of a diversity grammar (Booyesen et al. 2007), hence they merely perpetuated surface change. Ultimately, institutions have not done much to prepare students from different cultural and racial backgrounds for



effective ministry in different cultural settings. This study highlighted a lack of consciousness regarding the way in which institutions are organized, which then has direct consequences for students, identity and transformation.

Racism, whiteness and transformation

One significant finding of this study had to do with the race issue; as one student stated, “I think in everyone’s mind there is something about the color of your skin... we think about this, but we cannot speak about it.” In both sampled institutions, the interactions between groups reflected very much a microcosm of South African society, with its suspicion of the other, where students socialized in distinct racial and linguistic groups as a normal part of student life. In interviews in both samples, students spoke of incidents of racism in the residences and racial micro-aggressions in the classroom, the use of harassment and humor in talking about cultural differences and verbalizations of internalized oppression and domination (Naidoo 2016). Typically, when institutions engage in a passive role, negative reactions and misunderstandings are likely to occur (Steele 1995, 176–190). The problem is that there is a failure to see how all sorts of language and behavior practices reinforce what continues to be an uneven playing field.

This research highlights a space in which racism, yet again, has embedded itself and how racial identity informs power relationships within institutions. Soudien (2010, 352) argues that “race” represents the generative mechanism through which other forms of difference are constituted, reconstituted, reinforced or gain expression. He states that racism is often intertwined with other forms of discrimination—based on social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation and xenophobia—and uses them to justify and reproduce itself (Soudien 2010, 358). Post-apartheid South Africa hints at “the genuine irrelevance of race, but just beneath the surface lurks the deeper legacy of deeper separations” (Goldberg 2009, 530). In the liberal view, the enemy is apartheid and the solution is non-racialism (Kee 2006, 76). As Goldberg puts it, “non-racialism, like the emperor’s clothes, is what the state wears to represent itself to the world” (2009, 532). However, race continues to exert social effect even though the category has been officially disavowed. Within the sampled independent institu-

tion, for example, there was a tangible awkwardness towards talking about the race issue, and if racism exists at all, it is because of personal attitudes and bias. The uncritical appeal to *sameness* “posits whites as innocent bystanders to racial relations” and sustains a certain evasiveness regarding power by not recognizing “institutional inequality and the differences that race makes” (Frankenberg 1993, 19), either making it an “illegitimate topic for conversation” (Doane 2003, 13) or ignoring its socially constructed nature. Van Wyngaard (2014) reminds us that it would seem that salvation is not found when the privileged are converted towards solidarity with the oppressed, but found in an inclusive space that requires no conversion apart from the acceptance of the “other” (known otherwise as “tolerating”). This gazing on the “other” is done in a way that maintains possession and control over the “other” even in the absence of colonial powers. By denying the effects of racialization, color-blindness becomes a powerful mechanism in building white consensus and enables the reproduction of racism (Steyn and Foster 2008, 127). Racial difference, the ongoing “othering” of people based on pigmentation, the inability to embrace our common humanity as a point of departure, the reality of ongoing racialized and segregated socialization and new emergent forms of re-segregation all deny what we have in common and instead emphasize our differences. Despite the continuing problems related to racism in South Africa, within Christian spaces few people are talking about race. Carrim (2000, 33) contends that this culture of denial is related to at least three kinds of fear: (1) fear of losing privilege; (2) fear of continuing with the ways of the past; and (3) fear of civil strife.

Whiteness takes a postcolonial perspective as there is a relationship between exposing whiteness and decolonizing the imaginations of both the oppressed and oppressors. Steyn suggests that “whiteness in the new South Africa is characterised by a sense of vulnerability, by the belief that the spaces of whiteness are being infiltrated by strangers, by profound feelings of displacement, victimisation, withdrawal, and desire to escape” (2007, 422). Whiteness now has to contend with how to maintain a sense of privilege where black people have power politically, demographically and culturally (Steyn 2007, 423).

Lopez (2005, 89) asks the question, what happens to whiteness when it loses its colonial power, when it is in a structural position that confronts it with the experiential knowledges of the other? To answer Lo-



pez, some churches in South Africa have admitted and denounced racial complicity via confessional narratives and restructuring (after the TRC), but even still dialogue has not taken place sufficiently either through deliberate education that raises consciousness or through anti-racist workshops that entreat whites to depower themselves. In spite of the fact that the Church has played a critical role in the democratic transition of the nation (Kuperus 2011, 280), reconciliation remains contested precisely because social justice or the need for reparations were never adequately defined or discussed (Van der Merwe 2003, 285). The Church for the most part has remained racialized, as can be seen through the continuing ethnic and racial divisions within denominations or the white flight that accompanies the Africanization of worship. This is because healing and reconciliation have not been sufficiently internalized or explicated so as to be sustainable. Where there is a racial mix in local congregations, research has indicated that external factors such as demographic changes were the primary reason (Venter 2002). Unless forced to adapt, congregations do not deliberately change the own composition of their membership. In addition, theological uncertainties contribute to the ongoing racially segregated religious practices. For example, Nico Koopman (2008, 160) reminds us that:

The former racially separated Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa unified as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Although structurally unified as a multicultural and non-racial church it remains culturally and racially “separated” mostly due to unchanged geographical demographics and systemic and institutional reasons. It is failing to construct a new theology of interracial and multiculturalism despite the fact that it founded the *Confession of Belhar* which witnesses for authentic unity, reconciliation and justice.

In the Dutch Reformed tradition, there is an ongoing struggle concerning the unity of churches (Van Wyngaard 2014, 162). Eddy van der Borgh asserts that “ecclesial structures pose a specific theological question that is an *ecclesiological* challenge” (2009, 15). He states further that, “the theology of the church, guided by its creedal confession as being one and catholic, does not know how to account for human social diversity” (van der Borgh 2009, 4). Alan Boesak asserts that it is difficult for churches to take part in the transformation of society when churches themselves are not transformed (2012, 106). Racism contradicts the basic tenets of the gos-

pel, but it would seem that churches are more interested in improving their membership base and finances than in justice (Van der Merwe 2003, 282). What inevitably happens is that these social spaces, where white hegemony is not challenged, is then reproduced within the congregation (Cobb, Perry and Dougherty 2015, 178). Since churches have not fully dealt with their own apartheid legacy, Green et al. (2007, 398) suggest that white South Africans continue to “think white”, even in these circumstances, believing that whiteness *ought* to be the norm, “manipulating its considerable links to the power of global whiteness” (Steyn 2007, 422). Van Wyngaard, writing from a Reformed perspective, states that within liturgical spaces, “it is a particular personal and communal responsibility to invite ‘people of other colours’ into the space” (2014, 161), which then reinforces the normality of white-only spaces. This is an example of how cultures of whiteness and power discourses of resistance in the Church actively continue. According to Van Wyngaard, theological reflections on diversity fail to encourage white Christians to reflect on their whiteness and privilege, resulting in a failure to critically engage with issues of “race” in post-apartheid South Africa (2014, 158).

Reforming theological education

The above discussion on racism in society and the Church and the reality of whiteness supports the idea that the research findings (Naidoo 2016, 6) revealed on diversity cannot be reduced to a lack of interpersonal empathy in theological education. Instead, it highlights the fact that in religious environments, there are complex relationships of reproduction and unequal relationships of dominance, compliance, resistance and change. The analysis of the findings revealed the unrecognized ways in which the power assumptions embedded in institutional culture disenfranchise certain groups of students and undermine the educational mission.

Namsoon Kang (2010) proposes that theological education, like education in general, has played two roles: as a mere reproducer of existing reality and as a visionary challenger of the status quo. To seriously challenge the issue of power and knowledge is to envision a transformative theological education that seeks to “fundamentally re-imagine theological discourse, curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional systems from a perspective of the geopolitical context of human equality, justice and plurality and moves



beyond a colonial mentality of domination, hierarchy or kyriarchy” (Kang 2010, 31). Even efforts to conceive of diversity within South African higher education point to the need for integrating the “politics of cultural and identity recognition with the politics of social justice and equity” (Cross 2004, 390).

In our context, theological education will need to create human and humane teaching-learning communities with a commitment to social justice. This will entail a crossing of borders towards the “other”, a respect for human dignity and an urgent need for transparency and honesty, reciprocal teachability and inclusion of the marginalized. A transformation of identities is more likely to occur when people from society’s dominant social group are aware of their privileged position and willing to compromise (Christerson, Edwards and Emerson 2005, 161–162). Reddie (2010) speaks of challenging unaware white students to reflect on what privileges and opportunities they have accrued by the simple fact that they are white. The ethical task for those who are privileged, as Hobgood (2009) defines it, is to expose themselves to those who are oppressed as well as to expose themselves to new views about themselves. Pedagogical strategies rooted in anti-racist discourses (Ramsay 2005; Reddie 2010) can challenge students to question the taken-for-granted notion of their rootedness in a culture embedded in legacies of prejudice and alienation. Ministerial formation must also facilitate conversations of identity development within an individual’s social location: reclaiming culture, gender and other aspects of identity as part of moving towards greater authenticity (Palmer 2000, 11). This is possible via a process of conscientization (Freire 1970): from confronting the system to self-awareness (identity construction and social location) to re-articulation (construction of a new world) (Hill et al. 2009, 18). Epistemologically this would involve de-learning the colonial mentality in theological education; the universal notions of knowledge (Kang 2010, 31) and advocating for Africans as “participants and generators of knowledge from the vantage points of their geo-and bio-graphical locus of enunciation” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 338).

At the same time, a deeper commitment is needed from South African practical theologians to engage with questions of power: both voicing questions and participating in conversations. Dale Andrews (2012, 9) suggests that the challenges facing practical theology involve “understanding how

the myths of colour-blindness, meritocracy and the refusal to dismantle socially and economically inherited white dominance function to distort strategies of social justice”. In South Africa, we need to seriously engage with issues of race to decolonize harmful patterns of relating to one another so as to affirm the equality and dignity of all people. However, these kinds of discussions will be difficult to initiate considering the fact that practical theology in South Africa typically adopts a white-reformed approach, with the result being that “white perspectives and practices shape the organization and dissemination of knowledge” (King 2005, 403). Goto (2016, 127) writes of how the content and politics within the field of practical theology determine what is written and taught and who are understood as being the major players. All too frequently practical theology “fails to theorise the experiences of raced bodies and therefore perpetuates the invisibility” (Sheppard 2016, 220). Thus, there is a need for greater epistemological inclusion and for white scholars to actively join with black scholars in working against institutional racism (Beaudoin and Turpin 2014, 253). This also means accounting for one’s race in scholarly work; how it affects thinking, research and writing (Goto 2016, 127).

Conclusion

In considering how to reform the space of theological education, this chapter revealed research that showed how theological education can maintain the status quo of racism and whiteness that generates patterns of exclusion and discrimination. Maluleke reminds us that theology in our context has a unique role to play in “acknowledging, interpreting and enhancing agency of African Christians” (2000, 105) in their daily struggles against the cultural, religious and economic forces seeking to marginalize them. As practical theologians, we need to take seriously how issues of justice should reform theology, identity and practices within practical theology. We need to move away from a celebratory approach to diversity, while at the same time ignoring critical questions of power and oppression. Our postcolonial challenge is to envision a “new humanism”, new ways of relating that do not duplicate the dynamics of the colonizer and colonized.



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