


White fragility, white supremacy and white normativity make theological dialogue on race difficult



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South Africa is historically a nation of binaries. The most significant been the binary of black and white. In this case, black refers to all people of African and Asian descent or origin. Historical racism is examined in the light of white fragility, supremacy and normativity as ideologies that make it difficult for people to live together in one united democratic nation upholding the culture of human rights. The objective of this article is to propose dialogues on racism that, although triggering a range of defensive actions, feelings and behaviours such as anger, fear and silence should generate hope. Literature study is widely used for both definitions and methods of the research findings regarding white fragility, supremacy and normativity to suppress opportunities of dialogue. In order to address these anomalies, theological dialogue on the race problem is invited to follow five steps. These are looking back to move forward or come closer, moving from reaction to interaction, moving from exclusion to participation, moving from isolation to integration and, finally, promoting the fact that self-giving and openness are the ideal theological approach. Racism is a sin against God and against humanity. Despite the apparent persistence and legacy of racism, there is hope. Through dialogue, there is an understanding of another person's struggle, which brings some valuable perspectives.

Contribution: The key concepts of white fragility, racism, supremacy, and normativity inform the reader of the problem faced by social scientists such as theologians, but proposes a solution that comes through dialogue which follows the five steps to address the problem of racism.

Keywords: white; racism; supremacy; normativity; fragility; theology; dialogue.

Introduction

South Africa has a long history of racism, which revolves around the binary of black¹ and white. For close to four centuries, this binary had been a spectacle in the public domain. Expressions of intolerance, experiences of discrimination and 'human inability to embrace those different from us, have plagued us for centuries' (Winings 2018:353). Even during the post-colonial and post-apartheid eras, the white-black tangent is still conspicuous and detectable in all spheres of society. The seminal and subliminal reality is the black/white, superior/inferior, male/female, good/bad, heterosexual/homosexual binaries manifested through racism which breeds discrimination based on one's colour of the skin or an orientation – attitudinal or preference. This has become the 'customary habits of perception, memory, and discourse' (Goto 2017:33). Discrimination, based on race, includes more than making value judgements about skin pigmentation. It also involves evaluations based on 'natality and degrees of assimilation' (Alcoff 2003:19).

Brief definition of racism

Many South Africans seem to battle with racism. This article tries to define it as a subliminal attitude so deeply imbedded in people's hearts that its removal from the statutes of the state does not erase it at all. Lamola (2016:188) analyses Biko's philosophical conclusion that concluded that 'apartheid was racism as an attitude of mind among white South Africans'. The British evangelical scholar, John Stott (1990) gives the historical conceptualisation of racism as a reason for its rootedness and lodging in people's hearts:

The South African Nationalist Party makes much of this diversity. South Africa, they argue, has never been a single nation, but a kaleidoscope of distinct racial groups, each with its own national and cultural identity. What is needed; therefore, they deduce, is not a single integrated state (the 'melting pot' model), but 'multi-national development' or 'separate freedoms' – that is apartheid – each racial group preserving and advancing its own uniqueness. (pp. 223–224)

1. In this article, 'black people' is inclusive of people of mixed race and Asians.

Racism, according to sociologists, is an unequal distribution of privileges between white people and black people. Racism occurs when white people benefit from an unequal distribution of privileges and people of colour experience deprivation. Diangelo and Sensoy (2012:14) use the formula *racial prejudice + social power = racism*. The idea is stressed by Wallis and Gutenson (2006:81) that 'racism is a system of oppression for a social purpose' – purpose that is often economic in nature. The equation that results is 'racism equals prejudice plus power'. This can be observed when, in various ways, the state policies provide healthcare or education possibilities unequally by using racial rationing. This definition of racism only applies to white people due to white privilege, because others are of no importance on account of their low-class societal stratagem.

Racism is the term for the ongoing effects of white supremacy. It refers to the systemic and structural ways that our society is still white-centred, white-dominant and white-identified. It is an ongoing structure of society that gives advantage to white people at the expense of people of other racial groups. Racism is ingrained in almost every aspect of our culture and society. It affects us all – positively or negatively, directly or indirectly – on a daily basis.

This article looks at white fragility as a parochial camp; a comfort zone cushioned by white supremacy and white normativity. These ideologies make it difficult for people to cross over the walls of hostility to cohabit while building one united democratic nation upholding the culture of human rights.

White fragility

The democratic post-apartheid era necessitates the rethinking of white identities in South Africa. One way in which some white South Africans are seeking to redefine themselves is through describing themselves as Africans. However, claims by white South Africans that they, too, are Africans have been met with mixed responses from black South Africans. The advent of the book, *White fragility* by Robin Diangelo (2018) boldly addresses the fear of the white population's discussion about racism. Although this book is written from an American perspective, it has become very relevant for South African context. The other book that is contributing to the current debate of white fragility is by Gloria Wekker (2016) titled *White Innocence*, although written from the Dutch point of view.

Diangelo (2011) coined the term *white fragility* to describe the disbelieving defensiveness that white people exhibit when their ideas about race and racism are challenged – and particularly when they feel implicated in white supremacy. White people in South Africa and elsewhere outside Europe, through colonialism and segregation policies, adopted a protective attitude against racial stress. It is for this reason that dialogues about racism continue to trigger a range of defensive actions, feelings and behaviours such as anger, fear and silence (Diangelo 2018:99–106). White fragility refers to

feelings of discomfort a white person experiences when witnessing discussions around racial inequality and injustice. In other words, it is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. This article explicates the dynamics of white fragility. Although white fragility is not racism, it may contribute to racism by dismissing white domination and racial conditioning. By developing racial stamina (Diangelo 2018:62), white people can better address racism and strive to become anti-racist. For example, black people may find it difficult to speak to white people about white privilege and superiority. The white person may become defensive, and the black person may feel obligated to comfort the white person because of living in a white-dominated environment.

Although some white people may be against racism, they may deny that white privilege exists. By objecting to white privilege, white people contradict their objection to racism. The underlying factor is that the black or white binary ensures the supremacy of white people 'by reinforcing the apparent inevitability of white domination' (Alcoff 2003:17). As uncomfortable as it may sound, 'Whiteness and White privilege detract political attention from a critical study of racism' (Leonardo 2018:372). Straight talk on racism can, on many occasions, be uncomfortable, but as Boesak (1984) argues:

White values shall no longer be thought of as 'the highest good'. Blacks shall no longer hate themselves in terms of others. They shall, rather, move toward their own authentic blackness out of their Negroid and nonwhite character. In this way they shall force whites to see themselves in their whiteness and to perceive the consequences of this whiteness for others. (p. 17)

To deal with the triggers mentioned at the beginning of this article, Hook (1992) proposes that:

We need to apprehend those habituated symptoms of avoidance, aversion, disgust or discomfort – bodily reactions, bodily symptoms of racism – exactly those evasive structures of oppression that lie beneath discursive consciousness. (p. 208)

Efforts to dismantle white fragility through anti-racist theology consistently encounter 'various forms of intractable resistance' (Hauge 2019:228), even in the most progressive institutions such as churches, universities, colleges, et cetera.

White supremacy

Historically, the economic, social and legal systems of South Africa have been constructed with the assumption (spoken or unspoken) that white people are symbiotic with the current sociopolitical fabric of the society at large. This is rooted in history, especially during the 18th century, when European scholars gave their assent to what has been called the Aryan doctrine of racial superiority. This doctrine

claimed that 'Caucasoid people were naturally superior to the darker peoples of the world, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa' (Dunlap 1944:298). The doctrine of racial superiority implied that the so-called inferior peoples were subhuman and therefore 'morally open to the arbitrary exploitation by their superiors' (Paris 2000:263). This led to the formulation of racial policies that are universally known to be discriminatory, and promoting racial privileges such as white privilege, white normativity and white supremacy. White privilege refers to the fact that white people have advantages in society that others do not (McIntosh 1989:11). White supremacy is the belief that people with a white skin are superior and therefore should be dominant over other races. It is not just an attitude, but also a way of thinking. It has become more and more intrinsic to the culture (Diangelo 2018:23). History was distorted to substantiate it, laws were instituted to sustain it, and rationalisations were created to support it. Increasingly, benefits, services and opportunities were assumed to belong to white people. Freedom, citizenship, education, voting rights, and so forth, were for white people.

White supremacy is reproduced through social interactions with black others degraded as 'socially inferior' (Harris 1995:283). Racial integration in a social context, such as the suburbs where white supremacist systems are intact, undermines marginal spaces of resistance by promoting the assumption that social equality can be attained without changes in the culture's attitudes about black people (Hooks 1992:162). Whiteness 'is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others' (Diangelo 2018:24). Whiteness seems to be a position of status – invisible and subliminal. Wallis and Gutenson (2006:83) attest to this that racism, expressed through supremacist attitudes, can be very deeply hidden, and that it can show up in our interpersonal practices at unexpected times. White supremacy is a structural and ideological issue that has historically shaped a system of global European domination. Therefore, it is felt consciously in countries that have a history of colonialism engineered by Western nations (Diangelo 2018:29). It is the 'unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today' (Mills 1997:122). Indeed, it is 'a sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefits those defined and perceived as white' (Diangelo 2018:3). It is a structural power that privileges, centralises and elevates white people as a group endowed with privileges above others. Instead of portraying all people as the careers of *imago Dei*, white supremacist ideology opts to devalue the worth of the people who look different from *us* – based on the colour of the skin. Sadly, the white supremacist ideals pervade South African society in such a way that resistance to equality and respect of racial differences suffer on both sides of race spectrum. There is resistance to abandoning it and little or no and resilience to fight for it, both politically and ecclesiastically.

White normativity

The white supremacist ideology is inseparable from white normativity, which, according to the Dutch pedagogist, Gloria Wekker (2016):

... has given white culture a racial grammar, a deep structure of inequality of thought and effect based on race... and from this deep reservoir, the cultural archive, that, among other things, a sense of self has been formed and fabricated. (p. 2)

Despite more than two decades of democracy, and official efforts to rethink racial politics, whiteness in South Africa continues to exude a sense of normativity. This has recently been overlaid with defensiveness – an ambivalent and dangerous combination that resists rather than assists the process of reconciliation while deepening racial divisions. As West (2011) argues:

Whiteness operates as a cultural force, which to some extent relieves white people of having to negotiate their whiteness, except as defensiveness. The fixity of whiteness as a racial identification is best understood in terms of reification and valorization. (p. 21)

White normativity is a question of power. Bhabha (1998:21) has pointed out that 'the place of power is always somehow invisible, a tyranny of the transparent'. Normativity is always an internal or subconscious conviction that the 'super race' is privileged to establish and maintain certain norms and standards to which others must adhere. White people can 'safely' imagine that they are invisible to black people, because the power they have historically asserted over black people accord them 'the right to control the black mind' (Hooks 1992:162). Diangelo (2018:25) says it rests on the 'definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of colour as a deviation from that norm'. Hooks (1992) continues to observe that black progressives continue to suffer major disillusionment with white progressives when they 'discover that whites want to be with them and coexist as neighbors without divesting of white supremacist thinking about blackness'. White people often are unable to let go the idea that they are somehow better, smarter, more likely to be intellectuals and even that they are kinder than black neighbours or residents. This attitude continues to control the norms, ethos and ideologies of public spaces such as schools, movie theatres, shopping centres, churches, et cetera. White normativists not only control spaces, but also policies, practices, standards, et cetera, as a way of controlling these public spaces. West (2011) highlights this truth that:

The field of whiteness studies offers a broad post-colonial set of theoretical ideas that may be employed to examine the largely invisible ways in which white identity continues to suggest what is normal and universal, even as white western-hood is either challenged from contesting literatures and criticism, or repudiated from within its own self-regulating discourse. (p. 20)

In a similar vein, Crockett (2018:363) points out that it is normal for these people to use these spaces to normalise racism, marginalisation and voicelessness of the voiceless. They limit access to these spaces for people to interact with

cultural diversities in order to experience and reorganise social realities that can shape their perceptions. White normativity is a superior racial attitude that defines white as good, for example, a white lie is a harmless or trivial lie and therefore is tolerated and even acceptable. Black is evil, often portrayed 'as negative e.g. black sheep, black soul etc.'. (Crockett 2018:362). However, others may refer to this as racial prejudice. Wekker (2016:47) says of this attitude, 'For many white people, there is an automatic equivalence between being black and being lower class; these two axes of signification are closely related, quasi-identical.' Bhabha (1998) points out that:

... whiteness naturalizes the claim to social power and epistemological privilege, [and therefore] displacing its position cannot be achieved by raising the gaze of the other or by provoking the return of the repressed or the oppressed. The *subversive* move is to reveal within the very integuments of 'whiteness' the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority it is – the incommensurable differences that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself, the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority. (p. 21)

Historically, white people have not had to experience the same oppression, inequality and discrimination that black people have due to white people holding power. South African racial experiences from colonialism to apartheid revolved around the politics of exclusion. It is true that:

... the exclusion of African people from political participation in the political structures of South Africa gave rise to intense dissatisfaction, alienation and serious violence from time to time (Devenish 2013:333).

This exclusion influenced the normal ways of doing things in societal activities. For instance, during apartheid, white people never experienced long queues to be served, while black people were served through a window. The same allowances were not made for blackness, as exclusivity enhances the value of whiteness (Van der Westhuizen 2016:5). Now in the new dispensation, all people join the queue, and the process is long. White people, not used to waiting and being hard-pressed in a long queue, would always feel fragile or intimidated.

In contrast with African *ubuntu* [collective responsibility], the white worldview of individualism makes them respond defensively when linked to other white people as a group or 'accused' of collectively benefiting from racism, because, as individuals, each white person is 'different' from any other white person and expects to be seen as such. This narcissism is not necessarily the result of a consciously held belief that white people are superior to others (although that may play a role), but a 'result of the white racial insulation ubiquitous in dominant culture' (Dawkins 2004; Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield 2003) – a general white inability to see black perspectives as significant, except in sporadic and impotent reflexes, which have little or no long-term momentum or

political usefulness. Diangelo (2011:59) points to the fact that white people are taught 'to see their interests and perspectives as universal'. They are also taught 'to value the individual and to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group'. Individualism erases history and hides the ways in which wealth has been distributed and accumulated over generations to benefit white people today. It allows white people to view themselves as unique and original, outside of socialisation and unaffected by the relentless racial messages in the culture. Individualism also allows white people to distance themselves from the actions of their racial group and demand to be granted the benefit of the doubt as individuals in all cases.

As white people rarely experience racism, they often cannot see, feel or understand it. White South Africans have not been prepared to live as a minority in a deracialised society by their parents or institutions such as schools, corporates or churches; hence, bi-racial marriages in South Africa are still met with some public revulsion. It is scary that this phenomenon is very common within South African ecclesiastical communities more than anywhere else. Given that they share in multiracial church conferences, white people claim to be non-racist, while in the real sense they are subliminal racists couched in fragility, expecting their normativity to prevail. Cannon (2014:176) pleads for adults 'to teach children what is to be endured and how to persevere against the cruel, inhumane exigencies of life'. Leonardo (2018:372) highlights that white people who participate in dialogues around race and power 'are ill-prepared, either intellectually or politically'. Consequently, they rely on their emotions either to deflect real issues or to steer dialogues toward their comfort zones in order to feel 'safe'; at times even claiming they are victimised by public race dialogue. This absence of understanding and experience contributes to white people's lack of what Diangelo (2011:60) calls 'racial stamina'. However, white people can develop racial stamina by having direct experiences with black people by engaging in sometimes difficult dialogues with them. By building racial stamina, white people may be able to manage racial stressors rather than ignoring or silencing them. Conscious and explicit engagement with people of different races can help break the pattern of fragile behaviours and actions related to race.

Many white people in South Africa live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while, at the same time, lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress which leads to white fragility. Diangelo's research suggests that several factors lead to white fragility. These include segregation, universalism and individualism, entitlement to racial comfort, racial arrogance, racial belonging, psychic freedom and white dominance. Due to segregated living, white people may perceive a good school or a good neighbourhood as 'white' (Johnson & Shapiro 2003). Although discussions about what makes a space good are likely to be racially dependent, white people may deny these ideas.

Racial hierarchies tell white people that they are entitled to peace and deference. White fragility cries for sanity (which was prevalent during colonial and apartheid eras) that Diangelo (2018:19) calls, 'to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy'. In their perspective, if the intention was not to avoid living near people of colour but it happened anyway, it is not segregation. White people may feel racial innocence in such cases.

Also, white people may not understand the social burden of race, because they understand that race resides in black people. Because white people may not consider themselves part of a race, they are free from carrying the burden of race. The underlying message here is: *Leave me alone in my castle*. As South Africans who fought for survival for centuries, we all know that constant messages in history, media and advertising – and from our role models, teachers, and everyday conversations about good neighbourhoods and schools, reinforce white fragility. These notions promote the idea that white people are better and more important than black people. Unfortunately, the conversations are always misconstrued, as they sometime include fallacies such as impending ethnic cleansing or approaching civil war of black versus white – a kind of retribution for racial injustices of the past.

Theological dialogue on race is difficult

Theological dialogue on race seems to be an insurmountable wall in South Africa. We are a nation of binaries with chasms of the *fortunates* and the *unfortunates*. Theological dialogue on the race problem is invited to do so by following five steps: looking back to move forward or come closer; move from reaction to interaction; moving from exclusion to participation; moving from isolation to integration; and, finally, promoting the fact that self-giving and openness are the ideal theological approach.

Look back to move forward

White friends find such interactions difficult. Whenever the topic of historical injustices comes into question, they rush into the cocoon and declare that bygones should be bygones or that the hatchet should be buried, and we need to move on. In the meantime, the black people define themselves through history – the past is present in the present and, therefore, it should be dealt with presently. This complacency started during the time of slavery when preaching encouraged slaves to focus on the glories to come in heaven and not to dwell on the troubles of life on earth (Wells, Quash & Eklund 2017:168). This brought a conflict in understanding the message of salvation to slaves and Africans in general. Their oppressors lived like kings and queens enjoying life here and now, while they (Africans) were expected to live in *eschatological* hope – a *utopia* to be realised at the end of the age.

Colonialists, in partnership with the missionaries, found it difficult to differentiate the Bible message from European customs. For them, Christianity and Western customs were intertwined. Mokhoathi (2018) highlights this that:

... following western precedence, conversion was determined by behavioral norms, in which African converts had to abandon their traditional African customs and adopt the western ones. (p. 18)

Colonialism and apartheid theology led some black people to the conclusion that the God of the Bible stands in contrast with the God of the white people. They claim that white people are the best hypocrites ever. They preach what they do not live. Their message (Bible) contradicts their sender (God). The messenger (white missionary) possesses some flaws that taint the message he is trying to deliver. Black people reject the Christian faith because of white preachers' misdirected *evangel*. Nobody can testify that it is due to their human fallacy that they were not aware of the damage they were causing by failing to harmonise the message (Bible) with the sender (God). The message (gospel) was clouded with white supremacist ideologies:

Historically, Christian apologists made Euro-American culture superior to all cultural identities. Western culture was conflated with theological interpretation and religious practices, creating Christian supremacy that gave birth to White supremacy. Colonialism, Christianity and Culture, were wrapped and covered with the cloth of education. Missionaries were the mercenaries of their countries of origins. (Resane 2019c:5)

These historical developments make Africans generally to not see the difference between the Christian God of the Bible and the white people's racial attitudes and practices. White normativists exerted themselves by promoting their way of worship, clothes, instruments, et cetera, to legitimise Western civilisation imposed on Africans. To embrace Christianity was, as far as they were concerned, to embrace European customs. This picture is captured by the South African black theologian, Mokgethi Motlhabi (2008), in that:

The Western approach was mainly to recreate in the Western image everything that seemed alien to the Western worldview – to transform and refashion all that was different and anything that the missionaries and their colonizing partners did not understand. (p. 34)

Black people were not accepted as genuine Christians until they succumbed to European culture. The supremacist and normative ideologies built a strong sense of fragility for the white population in South Africa. This fragility has become a concrete barrier for many to cross over and reach out to the people of another race. Fragility causes suspicion and insecurity.

One of the major challenges African or black theologians face today is dialoguing theologically on race. The white supremacist groups encountered in churches, campuses and elsewhere claim the Christian faith or religious conviction of some sort. 'The racist ideologies that white supremacist groups interpret the world with are historically and

epistemologically intertwined with Christianity' (Montano 2019:275). Racism exists as a comingling of the Anglo-Saxon myth of cultural exceptionalism over other races with a natural law theology that imprinted on those races a construct of their created nature that favours subjugation (Brown Douglas 2015:1146). Moltmann (1996:6) decries this historical theology which he calls 'the messianism of modern times', the confidence that flowed from the unquestioning belief that what was done was done in the name of God who blessed the Developed world with progress. This creates a thick barrier against racial reconciliation and harmony in the post-apartheid South Africa, because it touches the deepest conviction of subliminal racism:

Trying to have a conversation about race – race and religion, race and politics ... is as difficult as trying to avoid talking about the two-ton gorilla of racism that sits not just in the living room, but in every room of the household of faith, from the Sanctuary through the Prayer-Room to the counselling room and the restrooms (Wright 2014:186).

A theology of dialogue is the attitude of Moses of 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up' (Ex 3:3). Dialogue becomes difficult, if not impossible, when the affected parties or one of them resists or rejects coming closer in order to understand. It takes one to decide to immerse into complexities in order to unravel the knotty issues for better understanding. The nature of the problem of initiating dialogue on race is complex and systemic:

The reality is that race, racism, white supremacy, white privilege and the religious traditions undergirding these worldviews are far more complex than that binary equation (Wright 2014:187).

Racism is the root cause of human dignity abuse, and it is embedded with hatred and bigotry. It formulated ideologies of colonialism and apartheid; therefore, setting an agenda for a liberation struggle. This liberation is a process, a struggle to resist systems of empire (Dibeela 2014:227), even those unwittingly designed by our own liberation heroes. The pursuit of liberating humanism requires the rejection and intolerance of any idea that maintain any form of white supremacy (Dibeela 2014:234).

Ideas about justice, fairness, respect and pluralism, which are central to the culture of dialogue, obviate against all forms of prejudice that inhibit the full flourishing of individuals and communities (Rothchild 2019:469). Theologians and Christian workers can overcome racial inhibitions by *incarnational* exercises in the public spaces. Like what Russel Botman (see Grundlingh, Landman & Koopman 2017:1243) proposed: 'diverse groups can learn to really *listen* to one another, *learn* from one another and *live* together in harmony'. This cannot happen through theologians re-coiling inside their spiritual or intellectual cocoons. It is my conviction that theology is oral and audible. I agree with His Holiness, Pope Shenouda III (1998:9), that theology is the discourse about God. Only those who have known God and their disciples are able to speak about him. Theology needs accuracy of expression and interpretation, and knowledge of the reliable sources believed in by all Christians.

Move from reaction to interaction

Regardless of all reactions – positive or negative – race talk must take place. Religious reaction for self-protection and self-preservation is the old wine in the new skin – the past practice that is irrelevant in our postmodern era. The interdependent world imposes new paradigms and a new criteria of self-understanding:

Indeed, a genuine self-understanding implies engaging in creative dialogue with the other and moving from a self-centred to an interactive self-understanding. Identity based on exclusive claims threatens the other and generates alienation. Identity defined exclusively in religious terms becomes a source of tension. Openness, dialogue and interaction do not create vulnerability; rather, they test the credibility and relevance of identity, and help community building. (Aram 2012:26)

Dialogue is a powerful tool that leads towards synergy and synchrony – and this comes through transformational processes. Transformation should be the result of dialogue between perpetrators and victims of racism, politics and theology, and civil society and the church. 'Theology must be a partner in resolving the issues affecting society at large' (Resane 2019a:5). It is the theology of dialogue that racial issues can be understood and addressed:

A theology of dialogue or dialogical theology requires introspective reflection where self-examination is deliberated to assess standing relationships with another view that may differ from one's own standpoint. (Resane 2019b:5)

South African history is dominated by the evil structures that promoted white supremacy and normativity at the expense of the dignity of the black citizens. It was all done for selfish ideals, hence Senokoane (2013:13) is correct by asserting that, 'It has to be clarified that white power was designed as an answer and advancement of white racism, at the same time, the dehumanising and breaking of a black man.' South Africans of all races should note that theological dialogue on race defuses potential abruptions or ethnic cleansing. The rationale for this is clearly set out by Boesak (2005):

The oppressed people of South Africa are irrepressibly religious. Their faith was never, as was so easily the case in white Christianity, totally divorced from their daily experiences of suffering and hope. Though many, out of fear and sheer despair, escaped pietistic, escapist religion, most did not and saw no dichotomy between their faith in a liberator God and their struggle for freedom. (p. 153)

What Boesak tries to point out here is that South African black people are intellectual enough not to revert to barbaric attitudes or practices that are not in consonant with the desires and commands of God, the liberator. Their faith is intertwined with their living experiences of poverty, discrimination, marginalisation, et cetera, and thus cannot be divorced from the reality of life. In the past, dialogue with the colonial oppressor or missionaries was not feasible. In the new dispensation, dialogue is the means to the end. After all, the current democratic dispensation came into being as a result of dialogue. South African democracy is a negotiated dispensation. To address the current white fragility,

supremacism and normativist ideals, 'there is a need to engage activities that aim to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions' (Resane 2019a:4). Peace is always the result of dialogue. Nations go into wars because of the lack of dialogue. Denominations or churches split because of the lack of dialogue, civil strifes flourish in communities because of the rejection of dialogue proposals, family feuds grow exponentially towards high divorce rates due to limited dialogue, and the racial tensions in societies grow like wildfires simply because there is no opportunity to dialogue. All these attitudes create an atmosphere of restlessness where there is no peace. The wisdom of Vaezi (2018) is remarkable:

Peaceful coexistence, showing respect to others in one's social life, respecting the others' rights and using the potentialities and capacities of all people to seek social growth and perfection are among the goals that all heavenly books have emphasised and considered as the final goal under the titles of 'happiness', 'prosperity' and 'deliverance'. (p. 1)

Because the nature of theological dialogue is exploratory, its meaning and its methods continue to unfold. Its essence is learning through creative participation between dialogue partners. The process of dialogue is a powerful means of understanding how thought functions. Without a willingness to explore this situation and to gain a deep insight into it, the real race crises of our time can neither be confronted, nor can we find anything more than temporary solutions to the vast array of human problems that now confront us. Peace will become impossible.

Move from exclusion to participation

One of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid is the consideration of minorities as outsiders. The Croatian theologian (now an American resident), Miroslav Volf (1996:60) points to the fact that, 'Exclusion is barbarity *within* civilization, evil *among* the good, crime against the other *right within the walls of the self*'. If that happens, then there is no community in the real sense of the word. When there is lack of mutual trust, there is no community. Rejection leads to isolation and isolation breeds hate and violence. Alienation or marginalisation leads to radicalisation. Community means full participation; it means inter-connectedness and inter-dependence underpinned by mutual understanding and trust (Aram 2012:25).

Racism protects (false) identity and promotes (false) security. Wherever identity is threatened, and participation denied, fragile loyalties are enforced through supremacist and normativist ideals. Such situations develop insecurity, isolation and hate. Hence, full and active participation of all members of a society, irrespective of their colour or religion, in all aspects of society life, including decision-making, must be ensured. Where there is participation, values interact, and identities are integrated to build a community of reconciled diversities. Unfortunately, for those imagining and experiencing white fragility, it appears difficult to move closer. They always carry a wrong motive as Volf

(1996:79) states: 'we penetrate in order to exclude, and we exclude in order to control – if possible, everything, alone'. They continue to cover their fragility by maintaining the status quo.

Move from isolation to integration

A community defines its self-understanding either in relation or in opposition to the other. In South Africa, it is broadly along colour lines. Racial identity generated isolation and threatened national unity through apartheid theology. In the post-apartheid South Africa, the other (black or white) is no more a distant or undisclosed reality across the railway line, the river or behind the hill; he or she is now a neighbour. Unconditional love of and for a neighbour, and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of Christian faith, including those of different religions such as Islam (Mk 12:29–31; Qur'an 3rd Sura). Neighbourly relationships should enhance deeper and holistic self-understanding and a greater understanding of the other. A society is composed of multiple identities. Co-existence of these identities remains a potential source of conflict when they are not integrated into a coherent whole (Aram 2012:25). Community building presupposes a quality of integration that provides equal opportunity, ensures diversity and enhances mutual acceptance. 'As faithful individuals, we might not agree on theological issues, but as citizens we live together, work together and jointly promote the common good of society' (Sinn 2012:45). A harmonious interaction between religious, racial identity and national loyalty is crucial. This is the most effective way of arriving at integration. It is only possible through theological dialogue at a lower level of neighbourhood co-existence.

Self-giving and openness are the ideal theological approach

The main goals of the race dialogue should be to seek mutual enrichment and commitment by providing space for people of different races (black and white) to share their experiences in a most transparent manner. Openness is the key to dialogue, because 'complete openness entails complete self-giving ... and complete presence of the other in the self' (Volf 1996:178). The atmosphere should not be intimidating, but conducive to transparency and freedom of expression. This is premised in the trinitarian God's co-existence (*perichoresis*) by which the New Testament talks about God as the one who proclaims in narrative the relationships of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, which are relationships of fellowship and are open to the world (Moltmann 1981:64).

Volf (1996:189) laboriously uses the Ephesians 5:25–33 text, 'Christ gave himself up for her'; although in reference to marital relationship, he refers to the church as called to engross in conversation to understand 'self-giving' in that one should love the other as one loves oneself, precisely because *no one ever hates his own body* (Eph 5:29). Racism can be addressed through self-giving (*kenosis*), which means abandoning self-absorption and moving toward the other in

order to nourish and tenderly care. It further means opening of the self to the other, letting the other find the space in the self – so much so that love for the other, who remains the other and is not transformed into an inessential extension of the self, can be experienced as the love of the self. Volf points to the reality that self-giving is a risky and a labour of love. There is no guarantee that it will overcome enmity, as it is open to the invasion by evildoers and therefore should be resisted without betraying the commitment to self-giving, because it reflects the character of the divine Trinity. The bottom line remains as Moltmann (1997:84) asserts: ‘True spirituality cannot be a solitary, selfish experience of the self, for every self exists in the network of social and political relationships.’

Without a theological context of trust within which people experience themselves as free and equal, the prospect of real dialogue is limited (Bigelow 2010:26). The interactions should identify and discuss substantial issues concerning Christian self-understanding in relation to racism. Theology that takes up the challenge of contributing to the shaping of common life, can only be meaningful and relevant if it considers its social, political and economic context (Kusmierz 2016:161). Theological dialogue on race reveals that racism is a demon and an idol. Wallis and Gutenson (2006:87) are emphatic that racism is the idolatry of whiteness; the assumption of white privilege and supremacy that has yet to be confronted. A theologian is expected to possess the ability to articulating a Christian theological understanding of dialogue on racism and relationship with racists. There should be a set of values and cautions to be observed:

The legitimacy of religious participation in public discourse also depends on the acceptance of a set of basic rules that govern such discourse within a democracy. (Kusmierz 2016:277)

This is feasible in the open atmosphere where transparency undergirds dialogue with the intention of creating a new society where all people are regarded as *imago Dei* creatures, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, grounded in the deeper unity of humanity which allows them to be in communion with and to be committed to the well-being of others despite religious, cultural, racial, economic and social differences (Clapsis 2012:29). Humanity finds richness in diversity; hence, initiatives to interact is crucial for acquiring this richness. Moltmann (1997:89) is correct when he states that ‘the people who are unlike find interest in each other, whereas people who are no different from each other soon become indifferent to each other’. Human diversities and differences necessitate relationality in all possible forms. Because of our history in South Africa, we need to apply dialogical and listening skills regarding racism (Baloyi 2018:4).

Conclusion

People experiencing white fragility may not be racist, but their actions, behaviours and feelings may promote racism. Avoiding dialogue on race contributes to racism. Disregarding the notions of white superiority and white privilege, racism will continue to hold its place in society.

Biblically, racism is a sin against God and against humanity. Reformed theology includes an account of original sin (a state we find ourselves in regardless of our own choosing) and actual sin (particular ways of being in the world that make original sin concrete and break the relationship with God and neighbour). Racism is the historically marked sin of South Africa, enhanced by apartheid system. South African Christians of all races should recognise it as part of human fallibility and as a violation of human identity and dignity. It destroys human communality and, therefore, rob humans of experiencing joy in togetherness. There is a legitimate theological justification for Christians to continually confess the brokenness they inhabit caused by racism. Van Dyk (2020) contributes towards positivity in confronting racism in South Africa:

We can create new imaginative possibilities through narrative approach – possibilities that point beyond the obvious context, including diverse stories that inspire and help as they benefit from each other (*I-Thou*). It will take time and effort, but we need to commit to building respect, mutual understanding and trust. (p. 2)

God equips humanity, through the Spirit, with the capacity of unity in Christ Jesus. No obstacles, no matter how ingrained or deep-seated, are strong enough to deny this unity indefinitely, and no force, no matter how pervasive or deceptive, is powerful enough to permanently eradicate this bond. Despite the apparent persistence and legacy of racism, there is hope. If we have the courage to engage in theological dialogue on racism, we can choose to change current realities and achieve the kind of unity and fellowship that Christ demands, but it takes work and persistence. God’s grace plus human responsibilities, together with confession which is perceiving and acknowledging the realities of our being, and repentance, which is changing our ways, come through dialogue that can lead to abounding hope. Through dialogue, there is an understanding of another person’s struggle, which brings a valuable perspective. Dialogue revives theological mantra stated recently by the Presbyterian Church (USA) (1999):

God loves variety and diversity. The grace of God is not contained within particular human groups, nor does God’s grace erase our differences. Racism falsely proclaims that difference is negative, rather than evidence of God’s abundant creativity. (n.p.)

Together in dialogue, we can overcome racial menaces!

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