

Whiteness and Public Theology

An Exploration of Listening

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Abstract

This article explores how whiteness continues to remain a problem when working towards a public discourse which seeks the common good. Recognising that a public sphere where all can participate as equals is a space available only to a certain class of people, it asks what the implication of this recognition would be for those who do indeed live in a position where they can participate in forming public opinion and policy. Exploring the discussions resulting from Samantha Vice's article titled "How do I live in this strange place?", a listening which leads to a deeper recognition of my own complicity in injustice is described as an important part of public theology for white South Africans. The particular responsibility of working against the injustice from which I benefit is furthermore pointed out as a specific task which white public theologians need to take upon themselves.

Keywords: Whiteness; Public Theology; Black Theology; anti-racism; religion and race

1. Introduction

For some, public theology might seem to be what comes after racism and colonialism – after the eras in which some were denied citizenship,² denied the right to vote and considered unable to rule themselves. After liberation we find public theology,³ a time and place where all citizens can participate as equals in public discourse on issues of public concern.

To insist that we cannot yet leave race behind is almost inevitably to cast doubt on the belief that we live in a society where all citizens can participate as equals. I do not wish to deny the importance of theology in the public sphere in general, but

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² See for example: "a central moral wrong of apartheid was its preventing non-whites from being citizens, from having public lives that engaged with and were recognized in the national polity." Lawrence Blum, "Antiracist moral identities, or Iris Murdoch in South Africa", *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2011), 450.

³ This is the explicit claim by Storrar discussed below – that we can only rightly speak of public theology where everyone is allowed to participate in public discourse. Where such a public sphere does not exist, one should speak about liberation theologies, which seek to establish this public sphere.

with others I insist that our ideals of what public discourse should look like continue to be complicated by the realities of how we are embedded in relations of power and systemic injustice. I therefore want to consciously explore the challenges race poses to white theologians participating in the South African public sphere.

This article departs from two recent South African debates. The special edition on South African public theology in the *International Journal of Public Theology* raised important questions concerning public theology and its relation to the liberation of people. A more public debate around the same time focused on Samantha Vice's call for white silence in public, which led to a number of responses in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*. Vice's explicit call for silence in the public sphere cannot be ignored or shrugged off by white South African theologians concerned with participation in the public sphere, and the article draws on her call and the ensuing debate as resources for critical reflection on public theology.

The article argues for a certain kind of listening as a first step for white theologians concerned with the common good, and for white theologians and Christians in general. This is a listening which allows new knowledge about myself to emerge and opens the call for a conversion regarding my relation to systems from which I benefit unjustly. In the last section white theologians are called to take a particular responsibility for focusing on those issues of injustice from which they are deriving privilege.

2. Whiteness and public theology

This argument is built on the assumption not only that race remains important in structuring life in post-apartheid South Africa, but also that the South African public sphere in particular is a racialised⁴ space. Race remains present in our public discourse, in spite of 19 years of attempted non-racialism and repeated claims of not seeing race or not being racist. One need not spend much time on the comment section of any online South African newspaper to be reminded of this fact. While this might be considered exaggerated, comments such as that of *Mail & Guardian* columnist Khaya Dlanga that "because of centuries of racial segregation, the vast majority of our disagreements are race-based"⁵ reflect something of the extent to

⁴ With "racialised" I imply that we live in a society where the social and political processes have formed us into groups which are racially distinct. Race has only a social existence and is being reproduced and maintained socially and politically. Dismantling racism therefore implies that the complex social and political system in which race is being reproduced needs to be changed. See Steve Garner, *Racisms: an introduction* (London: SAGE, 2010), 21-22.

⁵ Khaya Dlanga, "Sorry BBC, it's blacks who have no future in South Africa" *Mail & Guardian*, last modified 22 May 2013, [<http://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-22-sorry-bbc-its-blacks-who-have-no-future-in-south-africa>].

which South African public discourse continues to be determined and impacted upon by race.

In an argument emerging from the public debate concerning *The Spear*⁶, TO Molefe discusses various well-known instances where we were reminded that race remains important in public discourse: the Zapiro Zuma rape cartoons and reactions to these,⁷ Helen Zille's Twitter debates and refusal to acknowledge continuing racism in the city of Cape Town,⁸ and the responses to paintings presenting Jacob Zuma's genitals by Brett Murray and Ayanda Mabulu.⁹ His reflection is important, namely that although the white people involved in many of these clearly racialised public discussions can make some reasonable claim to opposing apartheid, this does not end the deep impact of race.¹⁰ Among these examples we will not struggle to identify how whiteness influenced either the content of statements made in public or the way in which these statements were made.

While these highly visible examples serve as reminders that claims that South Africa is "over race", or that race has no bearing on our public discourse, should be rejected, we need to further describe the racialisation of the self and society in order to reveal at least some of the complexities of whiteness in public life.

Linda Alcoff argues that the visibility of race and gender needs to be taken seriously in order to understand how systems of race and gender based oppression function. When we appear in public, these visible aspects of our identity may become even more important because we are not known personally. If we cannot disguise race, and thus do not appear as universal unmarked citizens, but carry in our visible bodies the history of apartheid and white racism, we need to critically reflect on "who has the right to speak in public debates conducted in the square? Are white or black people more likely to be interrupted with greater frequency? Are white or black people more likely to be referred to as having had a good idea in these discussions?"¹¹

McKaiser describes this as the social capital which whites possess in corporate South Africa compared to their black counterparts. A white candidate is considered competent until proven otherwise, while a black candidate is considered incom-

⁶ The Spear is a painting by artist Brett Murray which portray South African president Jacob Zuma in a pose which remind of Lenin, but with his genitals exposed.

⁷ TO Molefe, Black anger and white obliviousness: how white South Africa lost the privilege of being heard (www.mampoer.co.za: Mampoer, 2012), 14-15.

⁸ Molefe, Black anger, 17.

⁹ Molefe, Black anger, 21-22.

¹⁰ Molefe, Black anger, 24.

¹¹ Linda Martin Alcoff, Visible identities: race, gender, and the self (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23-24. While Alcoff uses gender as example in this part of her argument, the same can be argued about race.

petent until proven otherwise.¹² Similarly, in the public sphere, where whiteness continues to confer excessive resources for public opinion formation, we may argue that white voices are considered knowledgeable until evidence to the contrary appears, and black voices are considered uninformed until evidence to the contrary appears.¹³ In the process of racialisation, those who are white have been taught that we are more likely to have the truth, while others have been taught the opposite,¹⁴ and this impacts on how we speak and to whom we listen on issues of public concern.

This poses a particular challenge to public theology. While public theology is interpreted in a variety of ways,¹⁵ differing on what exactly is understood as “public” and what the appropriate way of doing theology in public should be, one common thread is that theologians and churches may participate in discussions on the common good and the formation of public opinion. But such assumptions on speaking in public, on having an influence on public opinion and policy formation, are simultaneously characteristic of how whiteness functions in a racialised world: having a particular history of insisting on its right to determine public opinion and policy, and in a racist society having the belief in its authority to enter any public space freely, a freedom denied to black people.¹⁶ This is not to argue that the one is the other in any simplistic way; that an insistence that religion and theology can indeed play a constructive role in a modern democracy is characteristically white.¹⁷ What I do want to open up, however, is that white South Africans need to become aware of how their social location contributes to both motivation and opportunity for participating in the public sphere. In short: how public theology is intertwined with the historical relations of power which are tied to the visible bodies with which we live and the meaning attached to these bodies in a racialised world.

Throughout this article I am guided by Linda Alcoff’s suggestion that “who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political

¹² Eusebius McKaiser, “How whites should live in this strange place”, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2011), 454.

¹³ We need to be clear that South Africa today clearly allows black voices, even critical black voices, to participate in the public sphere. But the way in which both black and white South Africans have been racialised often perpetuates the systematic acknowledgement of white voices as knowledgeable and black voices as having to first prove that indeed they “know what they are speaking of”.

¹⁴ Linda Martin Alcoff, “The problem of speaking for others”, *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991), 24.

¹⁵ See Dirk J Smit, “Notions of the public and doing theology”, *International Journal of Public Theology* 1, no. 3-4 (2007), 431-454.

¹⁶ Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing whiteness: the unconscious habits of racial privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), Kindle edition, chapter 6.

¹⁷ On the contrary, in South Africa Black Theology stands as one of the most important traditions of insistence that theology can and must participate in working for the common good.

struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena”.¹⁸ Her suggestion is that when evaluating attempts at speaking on behalf of others¹⁹ we have to analyse not merely the content of what is being said or merely the location of the one saying it, but rather “where the speech goes and what it does there”.²⁰ While considering the content of a responsible public theology is definitely important, this suggests that we also need to ask what responsible public theology would be, given the particular political implications involved with my participation in the public sphere, and with the very fact that I have the option of participating in the public sphere. Not only the content or intention of my words needs to be considered, but also what happens when I decide to participate in a particular way.

What I attempt is therefore not a universal outline for a race-cognisant public theology. Rather, my attempt is to find a way for those who are white, and we could add for particularly white South Africans, to work towards a race-cognisant public theology. To introduce some of the problems of public theology which contribute to this argument, I turn to a recent debate between William Storrar, Tinyiko Maluleke and James Cochrane.

3. Beyond an invitation to public discourse

Storrar describes the task of public theology as participating in creating and sustaining an inclusive public sphere. He describes “public sphere”, following Habermas, as “a domain of our social life in which public opinion can be formed, where any and all citizens can gather freely and without coercion to consider matters of general interest”.²¹ Storrar then attempts to go beyond Habermas by drawing on feminist readings of Habermas. He emphasises that the public sphere is what stands between people and power, and that the test of the public sphere is whether it can influence the formation of law and policy on behalf of the whole of society. Of importance is that this public sphere should be a place where the voices of the oppressed and marginalised can be heard.²² Cochrane’s summary of Storrar captures the essence of his vision for public theology:

the question of what makes for a responsible public theology is already answered, and it presents us with two specific challenges: to expand the sphere of the public

¹⁸ Alcoff, “The problem of speaking”, 15.

¹⁹ I do not wish to reduce public theology to a simple paternalistic “speaking on behalf of others”, but rather recognise that when participating in the public sphere we inevitably speak on behalf of someone and seldom, if ever, only for ourselves as individuals.

²⁰ Alcoff, “The problem of speaking”, 26.

²¹ William Storrar, “The naming of parts: doing public theology in a global era”, *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011), 28.

²² Storrar, “The naming of parts”, 29-30.

(so that more people are able to participate in it), and to defend it (so that those who do participate are not subsequently excluded from participation or unfairly constrained in their ability to participate).²³

A comment which has led to deep criticism from some of Storrar's South African respondents was:

Clearly, then, where such a public sphere does not exist or operate, we cannot speak of a 'public' theology in this definition, although we could speak of a liberation theology, for example, which contested the exclusion of the poor or other parties from history.²⁴

In the responses published together with Storrar's article this statement received sustained attention. While Maluleke does not deny that such a public sphere as Storrar describes is important, he remains sceptical of the possibility of such a public sphere, describing it as "a massive and precarious assumption."²⁵ His important reminder is that our differences is not that of culture and taste - where the biggest challenge facing the public sphere, and therefore the task facing a public theology which contributes to the creation and sustenance of this public sphere, is to facilitate the diversity existing within this public. Rather, our differences are those of power, where "men are gods and women their dispensable temptresses ... whites are masters and blacks are servants ... some have much to eat and drink while others have nothing".²⁶ Given this reality, Maluleke doubts whether public theology can deal with the differences in society. To formulate it in different words: does invitation to the public sphere, welcoming the stranger, allow for the creation of a public sphere where "citizens can gather freely and without coercion to consider matters of general interest" when these citizens are not all equally citizen, when the citizenship of those doing the welcoming is seldom if ever questioned, while the citizenship, the humanity, of the strangers is constantly called into question by the very fabric of our social life? Maluleke argues that public theology as described above might not be the best vehicle for what is needed to address the plight of the voiceless, and that the public role of liberation theologies should continue to be taken seriously.

²³ James R. Cochrane, "Against the grain: responsible public theology in a global era", *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011), 47.

²⁴ Storrar, "The naming of parts", 28.

²⁵ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "The elusive public of public theology: a response to William Storrar", *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011), 85.

²⁶ Maluleke, "The elusive public", 86.

Cochrane's critique follows a similar line of thought. He affirms the importance of participating in creating and sustaining an inclusive public sphere, and affirms the responsibility of speaking on behalf of the silenced, but is critical of Storrar's notion that protest theologies are not fully public theologies. Again we find the argument that even the most inclusive of public spheres continues to contain a tension between "civil" discourse and "prophetic" discourse.²⁷

I believe Cochrane drills down to the heart of the problem when arguing that if public theology is by definition possible only where certain ideal conditions of participation are already met, then not only do we not actually find many such examples, but this very approach also remains the privilege of a few, indeed of only certain classes of people.²⁸ While the notion of an inclusive public sphere needs not be rejected (indeed, for those sensitive to the way in which certain classes of people are silenced, such an inclusive public sphere should indeed remain an ideal), the belief that modern society is able to facilitate such a public sphere is under suspicion.

But if this is the case, what about those who do belong to the certain "class" of people who can participate in the idealised public sphere? Those who are the male gods, the white masters or who have an abundance to eat and drink. In short, if this public sphere where the stranger can gather as citizen, where the voiceless can be heard, remains elusive, in spite of our democracies, bills of human rights and constitutions, what does responsible public theology mean for those who are privileged with access to the resources to participate in this public sphere, those who are assumed to be knowledgeable, those who are rarely interrupted?

4. On white silence and the ability to listen

How can those who are privileged by race within a racialised society approach public theology? While this does not exhaust the possibilities,²⁹ the continuing debate which developed out of Samantha Vice's emphasis on silence in the political sphere provides an important place for white South Africans to start such a reflection. Alcott's guidelines on speaking for others furthermore flags important concerns to which I will return during the argument. She argues for some specific responsibilities for those in privileged positions:

²⁷ Cochrane, "Against the grain", 47-48.

²⁸ Cochrane, "Against the grain", 55-56.

²⁹ I have argued for a range of possible responses elsewhere (Van Wyngaard, 2012), but the limited space of this paper forces to focus on one aspect, and the current dialogue surrounding the article of Vice influences this particular choice. For a discussion of other responses see George J van Wyngaard, "Race-cognisant whiteness and responsible public theology in response to violence and crime in South Africa", (MTh thesis, University of Pretoria, 2012), 92-114.

- Analysing the impetus to speak and fighting against it. If we are more prone to speaking for the less-privileged than listening, the impulse to speak should be resisted and interrogated.
- We must interrogate the bearing of our social location on what we are saying, noting possible connections between our social location and what we are saying.
- We need to take responsibility for what we are saying, and commit to being held accountable. This implies being open to criticism, and a wariness where we note a quick rejection of criticism in ourselves.³⁰

The phrase from Vice's initial argument which caught the attention of many respondents was her suggestion to white South Africans that if one recognises the moral damage that whiteness has done to the self, "[o]ne would live as quietly and decently as possible, refraining from airing one's view on the political situation in the public realm, realizing that it is not one's place to offer diagnoses and analyses, that blacks must be left to remake the country in their own way."³¹

Vice's silence is not a total withdrawal from society. Her advice is that white South Africans actively listen to black voices and read the literature of the oppressed. Furthermore, if silence in the public sphere also becomes silence in the private sphere, in the sense that it becomes a refusal to acknowledge the effects of whiteness and to think about the situation, then this is a moral failure, not a virtuous action.³²

Lastly, Vice's silence should be described as an attempt to allow the excluded others to find their own voice. She quotes Paul Taylor: "Silence, on this reading, is the complement to *the other's voice*; it signals one's willingness to receive the other's struggle to find words both for his or her experiences and for the self that those experiences have conspired with the act of expression to create."³³ To relate this to the argument above, while Storrar's welcoming of the stranger is constantly described as an active process of inviting the voiceless, Vice's call for humility requires that the primary responsibility of white South Africans is working on our own whiteness, while opening up the space for black voices to continue with the task of public opinion formation and of bringing this opinion to political fruition, and through our silence communicate an openness to listening to the oppressed, an openness to having those excluded from the public sphere become voices in the formation of public opinion, including my own opinion.

³⁰ Alcoff, "The problem of speaking", 24-26

³¹ Samantha Vice, "'How do I live in this strange place?', Journal of Social Philosophy 41, no. 3 (2010), 335.

³² Vice, "How do I live", 336.

³³ Vice, "How do I live", 336.

Klippies Kritzinger's detailed exploration of Black Theology and its implications for a White Theology has similarly emphasised silence and listening as appropriate for white theologians and Christians. He places this within a process of conversion which provides a particularly Christian reflection on the structure of personal transformation.³⁴

Kritzinger writes about the "need for talkative white theologians to become silent and listen to what black theologians are saying".³⁵ Let me add that listening does carry the danger of repeating paternalistic behaviour – listening merely to entertain the ideas of the childlike figure that, given time, will be repeating dominant claims anyway. But what we are listening to in Black Theology is a voice which scandalises most white Christians, since it insists on repudiating "the right to determine the criteria for what is acceptable in all spheres of human endeavour".³⁶ If this call is taken seriously, it calls forth a form of listening which requires a certain conversion in white theologians.

For Kritzinger conversion is a double movement of negation and affirmation. Conversion always implies rejecting something and affirming something else. Listening to Black Theology implies being unmasked for our complicity in injustice to black people, finding ways of rejecting the continued oppression of black people (negation) and our role in this, while affirming "the creative role of black people in the transformation of South Africa"³⁷ and accepting the leadership of black people in the struggle for justice.³⁸ But the form such listening needs to take must be explored, particularly since an emphasis on listening is part of what constitutes civil behaviour, and this does not necessarily result in unmasking complicity in injustice.

Bruce Janz's response to Vice assists in describing a process of listening which seeks to unmask and work with my complicity in injustice. Janz argues for shame as an existential reality of the particular whiteness of South Africa. His approach provides a way of speaking about the shame associated with whiteness which is not dependent on a felt emotion³⁹ but rather is existential. Existential shame is not nec-

³⁴ In this Christian perspective Vice's "work on the self" does not sufficiently describe the process of transformation in an individual. While Vice does not necessarily imply a totally individual process, emphasising the importance of private spaces where other people are present for example, I believe a Christian emphasis on conversion calls us away from the individual working on himself or herself, and towards the role of others and the community.

³⁵ Johannes NJ Kritzinger, "Black Theology: a challenge to mission" (DTh dissertation, University of South Africa, 1988), 270.

³⁶ Bangkok CWME conference in Kritzinger, *Black Theology*, 271; this is exactly what Maluleke insists on repudiating in his reaction to Storrar, insisting that there is another voice which needs to be taken into account but which does not fit into the proposal for how the public sphere should be structured.

³⁷ Kritzinger, *Black Theology*, 271.

³⁸ Kritzinger, *Black Theology*, 272.

³⁹ The reality is that recognition of shame is not necessarily visible among white South Africans. Someti-

essarily felt, but sometimes manifest in the opposite (through hyper-nationalisms, hyper-individualisms and self-justifying stances). Shame then, when recognised, is a recognition of my own disorder, a disorder which exists even when not recognised as shame. “That disorder comes in part from the recognition that the white South African self cannot truly own its place in the social order, since that place has come at the cost of others, if only indirectly.”⁴⁰

Seen in this way, silence in the public sphere is not merely motivated by the fact that the public sphere is weighted in my favour, and I should therefore commit not to entrench white privilege by continuing to assume that I may dominate the public sphere; nor is silence merely an invitation for others to speak, although that is important. Silence is motivated by a growing recognition of the disorder of my own being and disconnection from the society of which I am part.

Janz suggests that such a view of shame allows for an important exploration of Vice’s suggestion for listening. Listening is described as a form of witnessing. Witnessing bare life. “It is the bare life that existed as a result of white action during apartheid, and also the bare life that became apparent within whites by virtue of the actions of other whites”.⁴¹ This listening involves refraining from thinking that we know how “they” are, as well as refraining from listening just in order to hear what “they” want, so that we can satisfy those who were wronged.⁴² This opens the space for the listening which can lead to the conversion which Kritzingler describes.

James Perkinson formulates this in a way which might assist us in drawing out the implications of listening when he argues for a disrupted whiteness which takes blackness as pedagogue, as first mirror of self-recovery.⁴³ This pedagogue is again not one from whom we learn what “they” want, but rather from whom we learn about the world we are in and how we have been shaped by a racist history. It is a listening in order to learn how I am embedded within a system of injustice, and what the implication of this injustice is on the real lives of people. To learn how my own whiteness continues to determine how and when I participate in public discourse, and what I choose to focus my energy on. It also involves learning how race continues to determine assumptions on the right to be heard, the right to influence public opinion, and the right to take up space in a public discourse in a

mes the opposite is true. Vice’s silence was as a response to the appropriate emotion, shame, which has led some of her critics to fear that silence could then become a way of ridding ourselves of shame, so that whites are silent for their own self; Derek Hook, “White privilege, psychoanalytic ethics, and the limitations of political silence”, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (2011), 497.

⁴⁰ Bruce B. Janz, “Shame and silence”, *African Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (2011), 466.

⁴¹ Janz, “Shame and silence”, 468.

⁴² Janz, “Shame and silence”, 469.

⁴³ James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: outing supremacy in modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 103.

society where history has been written in black and white. It involves listening to this history and refusing to deny its continuing impact.

Moving back to the initial debate on public theology, such a listening, which calls to conversion those gaining from unearned privilege connected to the oppression of others, asks that it is exactly the angry voices, the voices of protest, which need to be listened to, which need to be witnessed. Recognising that I am inherently tied to the injustice which gives rise to anger and protest should make me wary of making a too definite distinction between civil discourse and protest discourse. It is exactly in listening to the anger against injustice, coming from those who suffer from said injustice, that we are confronted with the (im)possibility of a more inclusive public sphere.

While listening in order to witness bare life, in order to gain a deeper understanding of my own complicity in continuing injustice resulting from how the world, and South Africa in particular, has been shaped by race, in order to gain a sense of understanding of my own disorder, is no guarantee that all will be well, it provides an important route for those privileged by a history of injustice. Without such a deep listening, radical conversion towards the work of transformation (which in South Africa involves an affirmation of the creative struggle of black people against racism) remains impossible.

Now that listening has been clearly identified as the primary posture required by those benefiting from injustice, we need to be reminded that this does not necessarily call white South Africans to permanent refusal of or even a moratorium on participating in South African political life. Sally Matthews⁴⁴ argues that in order to effectively challenge injustice we need to have a higher priority than finding a pure moral self. This does not take away the dangers of reinforcing privilege through our attempts at working for justice, but she argues that the best thing those who have certain unearned privileges can do is to work towards undermining the unjust systems which confer these privileges. It is appropriate, however, if this is accompanied by a healthy hesitancy, a hesitancy which allows the impulse to speak to be interrogated, although this should not lead to a demobilised withdrawal from the struggle for justice.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sally Matthews, "Reflections on the appropriate use of unjustly conferred privilege", *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory* 60, no. 2 (2013), 23-41.

⁴⁵ Such a perfect balance is probably impossible, and just as those in privileged positions would almost inevitably at times act in ways which defend unearned privilege, those who become conscious of their unearned privilege would experience phases of demobilisation. Being conscious of this should assist us in working through these phases as part of a lifelong struggle for justice. It is important to note that such feelings are indeed at times part of a continuing engagement with privilege and to remember that others have worked through these in the past.

In responding to Vice, McKaiser points out that the emphasis on silence might be an expression of lingering whiteness when it assumes that the black interlocutor cannot effectively rebut whiteness.⁴⁶ In South Africa we can indeed expect that articulate black voices will call out whiteness which is being reinforced. Rather than refusing to participate, we might go back to Alcoff's suggestion that white people need to be open to criticism, and to add to this, need to learn to make criticism part of an ongoing conversion. In short: the question is again whether critique can be truly listened to.

Let me add that for white people who become conscious of their privilege, withdrawal from political life might also simply be the easier way out: I then refrain from airing my views and therefore do not need to face the criticism of black interlocutors, and the possibility that my behaviour is repeating that which I claim to be against. Such an attempt at a public presentation of purity is not contributing to justice at all.

5. Speaking to privilege

Drawing on the above emphasis on listening as the appropriate posture for those living with unearned privilege, and in further seeking to complicate the search for an inclusive public discourse, let me suggest one task which needs to be taken up by white South Africans, and white public theology in particular. At this point in the argument it should be clear that the way in which certain classes of people are included and others excluded from a space of public opinion formation is not a problem external to white theologians. When working towards a deeper inclusion of people in a public sphere, white theologians not only work against problems external to themselves (privatisation of religion, lack of public oversight of private businesses, or the inability of civil society to effectively stand up against government), but also need to recognise themselves as implicated in the exclusion of people, in this case particularly the systematic exclusion of black people from influencing public policy. This implies that we recognise ourselves as part of the forces of exclusion which need to be opposed.

So let me turn to one thing that white people must take responsibility for doing, one which can be said to underlie the article of Vice and her white respondents. When white voices enter the public sphere it is as participants that are in certain ways operating from a privileged position. If the best thing those who have certain unearned privileges can do is to work towards undermining the unjust systems which confer these privileges, as stated above, then as privileged participants one primary responsibility which white people need to take upon themselves is to engage their own privileged position in public.

⁴⁶ McKaiser, "How whites should live", 460.

If white people are to be implicated in the problematic aspects of their group regarding the acts in which they have engaged as individuals,⁴⁷ then this should be all the more so when entering the public sphere. In the politics of public discourse, a white person cannot escape being identified with white people as a group, although they can indeed be at odds with how whiteness is being perpetuated; and it is exactly in this tension that the possibility for responsible public participation might emerge. It calls for interrogating our social location, and asking what it does when a person who is visibly identified as part of this group takes actions which undermine the power of this group.

The position required has been described by some as that of the race traitor.⁴⁸ In a context where silence is expected on issues of race and its continued effect in society, “(t)raitorness requires me to insist on my whiteness – to insist that I and others recognise my whiteness as always relevant, always a factor in the way that I conceive the world and others; and to detect that factor in the places where it is presently most undetectable to me”.⁴⁹ The traitorous position does not make me less white in the sense that the various systemic privileges provided with being white can somehow be denied. It does mean, however, that the normalised constructs are being destabilised when the common assumptions held by those who are white are being questioned by some who are supposed to be insiders.⁵⁰

If taken up by white public theologians, this implies working towards destabilising the centre. This calls for a commitment to analyse the undeserved privileges associated with whiteness, and insisting that this may not be silenced in public discourse.⁵¹

⁴⁷ For example, the act of researching fellow white South Africans creates a process of othering which can create the sense that the author is somehow separate and immune to what is being described; Melissa Steyn, *Whiteness just isn't what it used to be* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), xxxiv-xxxv. One danger facing scholarship conscious of its racialised whiteness is the belief that the ability to describe this reality dissolves our being complicit in it. There is a temptation to take the position of being the observer of whiteness, and in so doing to dissolve being implicated in the continued system of racialised privilege.

⁴⁸ Alcoff points out how some drawing on the language of becoming race traitors have suggested that this implies that white people can somehow reject their own whiteness, assuming that the privileges associated with being white no longer exist. None of the arguments used here understand the traitorous position in a way which would imply that I can somehow get out of my whiteness. The repeated discomfort expressed with this term, however, does suggest that a better description is required. I keep using it for the moment, however. See Linda Martin Alcoff, “What should white people do?”, *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998), 14-21.

⁴⁹ Sullivan, *Revealing whiteness*, 159.

⁵⁰ Allison Bailey, “Locating traitorous identities: toward a view of privilege-cognizant white character”, *Hypatia* 13, no 3 (1998), 32-33.

⁵¹ One of the primary ways in which whiteness is described is as a certain kind of invisibility. While some have challenged whether this is appropriate in South Africa, since race was made a conscious marker which determined a highly visible hierarchy, my particular suggestion for insisting on whiteness is dependent on a context which in the post-apartheid South Africa is actively denying that race deter-

While listening suggests that black people become our primary influence concerning matters of race, including those voices expressing anger at continuing to be silenced, the insistence on recognising whiteness points to the white public as our primary audience, calling members of this particular group, as part of this group, into active work on the disorder associated with their position, and a struggle against its unearned privilege. In short, drawing white South Africans into a deeper listening which would allow the disorder of our own position to be opened up.

Between political withdrawal and attempting to participate in forming a public opinion in general, we need to recognise that our social location calls us to take responsibility to speak on particular issues and to particular people. In practice in the South African context today I would therefore suggest that white theologians have a particular responsibility of asking questions concerning undeserved wealth acquired due to a history of injustice and the continuing residential segregation of society through the construction of gated communities (to take but two examples). But effectively doing this, implying that I work from a deep knowledge of what it is that needs to be questioned and challenged, depends on truly listening to those who suffer from injustice and inequality.

What might therefore be considered a kind of prolegomena of public theology, interrogating my social location and its bearing on what I am saying, should be considered an important aspect of public theology for those privileged in various ways. This implies drawing those who share my systemic privilege to a deeper attention of how the perpetuation of this position is detrimental to the common good and an inclusive public sphere. Expanding and defending the sphere of the public implies dismantling that which provides me with an unearned influence, since I have to recognise my own position of privilege as built on the same system of oppression which silences others.

6. Conclusion

The pages of an academic article may never be able to reflect the complexities of life. While I believe the above pages reflect important aspects of a responsible public theology for white people, an attempt to achieve “pure listening” and “pure engagement of unearned privilege” is most probably unrealistic, if only because I am never only white. After exploring some specific suggestions which might contribute to a more responsible public theology for white people, we also need to repeat the point above: [w]e need to take responsibility for what we are saying, and commit to

mines continued privilege, reinventing notions that privilege is purely due to “hard work” or “individual commitment” rather than systemic advantages. In this way there is a continued attempt at a white silencing of benefiting from injustice in South Africa.

being held accountable. This implies being open to criticism, and a wariness where we note a quick rejection of criticism in ourselves.

Listening is not a “step” in a process, something which occurs “before speaking”, but rather a posture which we are continuously being called back to. Rather than a linear progression from listening, to emphasising unearned privileges associated with race, to speaking out against moral threats in society in general, these will continue to happen simultaneously.

My conclusion is tentative. Listening might not be a personal quality that comes naturally. My being drawn to public theology was partly due to a personal inclination to speak, to contribute to public conversations on justice. But this inclination, exactly because of the political implications associated with my position in this particular context, needs to be resisted at times. Rather, my own disorder needs to remind me that I should listen more, to take blackness as a pedagogue for living in this place, and that what is required is a continuing conversion from my own whiteness.

Secondly, my own social location needs to influence what I take responsibility for. If I choose to work against only the injustice which I consider myself to be disconnected from, in which I can name others as perpetrators, and ignore the injustice which I benefit from, then this choice needs to be challenged. White theologians do not arrive innocently at a place where the public sphere can be extended and defended; rather they need to be conscious of how their own position contributes to the exclusion which they claim to work against. Rather than only extending and defending a sphere to which they have access, the very power which opens the public sphere to them and not to others needs to be worked against.

This cannot exhaust possibilities for white public theologies, but where listening and an emphasis on taking responsibility for the injustice from which I gain is not adequately explored, I want to suggest that our white public theologies will always run the risk of perpetuating the injustice which they claim to oppose.