

## Interlocution and Black Theology of liberation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: a reflection

Vuyani Vellem

Centre for Public Theology, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, University of Pretoria,  
Pretoria, South Africa

### *Abstract*

Before the dawn of democracy in South Africa, in the methodological debates that were associated with who the interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation was, there was a tacit understanding that not everyone who is black is necessarily an interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation. The changes arising from globalisation which coincided with the demise of apartheid seem to have diffused the clarity of interlocution in the Black Theology of liberation school as it was sought before. Another problem is that post 1994 more emphasis has been rather on the notion of prophetic theology whose relationship with the liberation paradigm is becoming equally unclear. This article will trace the debate on the interlocution and highlights the differences between prophetic theology and Black Theology of liberation in order to assert the interlocution of Black Theology of liberation with the voiceless in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Introduction**

“Voice and voicelessness” in the shifting economic and political spaces of the new millennium is a theme that prompts the memory of the debates centred on interlocution in Black Theology of liberation. Indeed, memory here is used deliberately as a dangerous phenomenon, particularly the *memoria passionis* of the poor and marginalised given the contestations of memory in South African public life in post 1994. For example, the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park respectively symbolise the memory of the Afrikaner people and the one of the struggle for liberation. Ostensibly, the Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park remain symbols of polarity in “one nation that is in the making” after the demise of apartheid. Since the demise of apartheid though, certain discourses seemed to have been relegated to the background while others dominated public life as if suppressing the memory of the others, particularly the voiceless, had become the norm. The resurgence of the theme, “Voice and voicelessness” which is arguably resonant with those themes of Black Theology of liberation that seemed to be forgotten after the demise of apartheid is akin to that irruption of the dangerous memory of the poor in post 1994. This means that no matter how much the memory of the poor can be suppressed, it will always irrupt again. My reflection on the concept of interlocution within the framework of this theme is inspired by this dangerous memory.

The demise of apartheid is often counted among the signs that are used to define the new spaces and shifts of power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The word globalisation, which *inter alia* entails the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, epitomises the mood of these changes. It is often said that globalisation brought an end to the binary view of the world as the collapse of the walls that separated the West and the East created an interconnected, borderless world. Add to these signs the rise of information revolution that has enhanced global communication in unprecedented ways to appreciate these shifts. These shifts inevitably marked a kind of newness which equally required new ways of articulating old problems and new ones in the changing order of the world. While some have brought the concept of postmodernism as a new way of articulating these changes and shifts, others have preferred the concept of postcolonialism as an appropriate and logical discourse to analyse the rapid changes that are taking place in the world today.

It is exactly at this level of the talk of newness that in our South African context new proposals for doing theology became palpable.<sup>1</sup> These innovations also took place outside the borders of South Africa, particularly the proposal for “a reconstruction theology” associated with Jesse Mugambi and networks of public theology on the globe. It is not these new proposals that are the subject of my reflection in this article as they have been engaged and will continue to be engaged,<sup>2</sup> but the apparent

<sup>1</sup> One of the most notable proposals in the new shifts of power in South Africa is “reconstruction theology.” Cf. Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Other projects such as public theology became rife after the demise of apartheid in South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Reconstruction theology has been engaged by Tinyiko Maluleke, “Black and African Theologies in the New World Order,” *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 96(1996): 3-19; Elelwani Farisani, “The Use of Ezra-Nehemiah in A Quest for an

loss of interlocution, now re-emerging, which is an indispensable tool for the discussion of the theme “Voice and voicelessness” in the new millennium.

By moving back from the Polokwane Moment (the national conference in Polokwane where Jacob Zuma defeated Thabo Mbeki as president of the ANC in 2007), some of the debates that dominate our public life today become clearer than they were before. It is now common knowledge that Mandela’s administration was different from Thabo Mbeki’s one on its emphasis on reconciliation, while the latter’s focus was on the delivery of services.

The Polokwane Moment however was not only robust, but also rough, savage, cruel, disgraceful and impolite in many ways. Amidst such a rough phase of our democratic history, there have been cries in public life at the silence or absence of a prophetic voice from the Churches.

The rupture of the liberation movement, or better its wreckage at the occasion of the formation of a new political party breaking away from the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of the People (Cope) exposed these ambiguities that prevailed since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. Most importantly these signs of the Polokwane Moment signified something about the exact role the church has to play in a legitimate state. It is good to start from the interstice of the Polokwane Moment as many of the problems we now see today were predicted quite early into our democracy. Secondly, it does make methodological sense if one recalls that in Africa, praises can either take an ascending or a descending order. The methodological approach to the question of interlocution in relation to the theme of “Voices and voicelessness” in South Africa is thus not a repetition of things already argued, but a “steep” descending view of our democracy from the “high” location of the Polokwane Moment and now, the looming Mangaung Conference of the ANC in Bloemfontein in December 2012.

The subliminal text of this reflection therefore is whether South Africa is descending into a chaotic country of a failed state or not due to the apparent diffusion and *de-historicisation* of a clear interlocutor post-apartheid. In this article, I reflect on the notion of critical solidarity and interlocution in the Truth and Reconciliation discourse and now recently, interlocution and economic liberation arising from such calls as “wealth tax” or “economic liberation in our life-time”, for the sole purpose of accentuating the indispensable role of interlocution in Black Theology of liberation. This article does not reassess or rearticulate the important tenets of Black Theology of liberation, but appropriates these to the current elusive or confusing relationship between prophetic theology and Black Theology of liberation. I begin with a brief catalogue of the understanding of interlocution in Black Theology of liberation.

### **A catalogue of the understanding of interlocution in Black Theology of Liberation**

It is not necessary to trace the notion of interlocution to the “patriarchs” of the liberation school of theology because it is a well-known concept used by almost all schools of theology today in the world. It might be important though to retrieve one of the most important assertions that Allan Boesak made more than thirty years ago that, “Black Theology is a theology of liberation” related to those pioneering works of James Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez holding that liberation “is the content and framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Jacob Tefsai, whose work primarily examines the controversy that raged between liberation and orthodoxy in theology, painstakingly argues that there are at least discernable “emerging commonalities” between these two schools.<sup>4</sup> He remarks that it is astounding to note some convergences despite the differences between these schools, particularly on significant concepts such as *inter alia*, “the preferential option for the poor”.

Tefsai (1996) further says that “in the last thirty years, the discussion on the shape of the poor’s presence in the church and society has been transformed.”<sup>5</sup> He observed this transformation some fifteen years ago, based on the date of the publication of his work, to refer to the shift from the age old orthodoxy of the church that failed to give authentic attention to the centrality of the poor in Christian theology. In South Africa “nobody” seems to have a problem with this concept, particularly after the demise of apartheid as it is widely used in many circles across the various theological schools that were poles apart in the struggle against apartheid. It is this common use that is becoming a serious challenge

---

African Theology of Reconstruction” (PhD diss. University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2002); Barney Pityana, “Beyond Transition: The Evolution of Theological Method in South Africa. A Cultural Approach (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 1995); Vuyani Vellem, “The Symbol of Liberation in South African Public Life: A Black Theological Perspective” (PhD diss, University of Pretoria, 2007); and Vuyani Vellem, “Ideology and Spirituality: A Critique of Villa-Vicencio’s Project of Reconstruction Theology” *Scriptura* 105(2010): 547-560. Public Theology has also been engaged cf. Allan Boesak, *Tenderness of Conscience* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005); Tinyiko Maluleke, “The Elusive Public of Public Theology,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 5 (2011): 79-89 to mention but a few.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977): 14.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Tefsai, *Liberation and Orthodoxy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996): 112-135.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Tefsai, 1996: 128.

given the fact that the history and the actual roots of the concept of the “preferential option for the poor” are often not regarded as crucial to offer guidance to its application in the context of political liberation in South Africa.

Gerald West offers a good summary of liberation theology and therefore the necessary ingredients of the concept of the preferential option for the poor when he says:

[Biblical] liberation hermeneutics has at its core five interrelated emphases, which can be found across a range of liberation theologies. These five areas of emphasis include, according to Per Frostin, “the choice of ‘interlocutors’, the perception of God, social analysis, the choice of theological tools, and the relationship between theory and praxis”.<sup>6</sup>

Without overlooking the importance of the biblical liberation hermeneutics cited above, I suggest that we focus more on the liberation hermeneutics and its core interrelated components for our discussion of interlocution. I therefore must emphasise that: all these components are interrelated. In other words, one cannot discuss interlocution without taking into account the perceptions of God, social analytical information or data, praxis and the tools in use. While there is an “emerging commonality” in the understanding of God in the light of the question of the “preferential option for the poor”, there is no clear convergence between the tools, the social analysis and the praxis of most theologies that have tacitly accepted this notion.

In other words, the choice of an interlocutor is a key to distinguishing one form of theology from the other. Black Theology of liberation has distinguished itself from Western orthodox theology by choosing the “non-person” as its interlocutor, different from the “non-believer” that has been the interlocutor of orthodox Western theology that undoubtedly remains part of the problem in South Africa post 1994. I cannot overstate the importance of Gerald West’s clear exposition of the trademark of liberation as a paradigm and most importantly, the vividly stated need to make a choice of interlocutors.

From this brief discussion therefore, note how Tinyiko Maluleke presents this summary of the understanding of interlocution in Black Theology of liberation:

Within the Black community, it was acknowledged that there were men, women, petit bourgeois, rich, poor, a worker class, etc. Even more significantly, it was realized that not “all Black people [can] do black theology” and therefore Black Theology does not amount to “any theology done by any group of Black people” (Mosala 1989b:143). Thus while objective Blackness remained a basic category of social analysis, it became one amongst several other categories. It thus became important for Black theologians to identify a community of interlocutors – not informants, objects or beneficiaries – within the diverse Black community.<sup>7</sup>

The quotation above indicates that class is an important aspect and that not every black person is necessarily an interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation. Blackness therefore remains an important category among others in determining who is an interlocutor for Black Theology of liberation. With these thoughts, let us conclude this section therefore, by recapitulating what I think are the important points we have made so far.

While there is an emerging commonality regarding the concept of the “preferential option for the poor” not only in South Africa, but also on the globe, it is exactly this common usage of the concept that seeks careful scrutiny. One component of the liberation paradigm as their interrelatedness is crucial and must not be dismembered from the rest. If black interlocution is chosen as it is the case in this article, it must *ipso facto*, be vividly stated as such in order to define and identify the contours of a chosen theological paradigm. The notion of “Objective Blackness” must always be remembered as not implying that every black person can be an interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation because there are several other categories to fulfill to be an interlocutor of this theology. One of my positions about this school is that, it is essentially a paradigm that goes beyond the borders of Christianity. With this in mind we now reflect on the elusiveness of interlocution in democratic South Africa.

### **The elusive interlocutor of democratic South Africa**

---

<sup>6</sup> Gerald West. “Human Flourishing and Social Transformation: Bringing Embodied Theology into the Public Realm,” *Reformed World* 59:3 (2009): 165.

<sup>7</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke. “Do I, with my Excellent PhD, Still Need Affirmative Action? The Contribution of Black Theology to the Debate” *Missionalia* 24:3 (1996): 303-321.

I have chosen to pursue this conversation by firstly looking at the debate that took place around the issue of Affirmative Action (AA) in post 1994 South Africa. Tinyiko Maluleke is one of the theologians who tackled this debate from a Black Theology of liberation perspective. It is important to recognise that Maluleke (1996), in his article entitled: “Do I, with my excellent PhD, still need affirmative action?” returns to the basics of interlocution within the context of a debate around AA in South Africa.

What is important though, extremely relevant to our discussion, is the fact that confusion in the debate, according to Maluleke (1996), arises from the fact that “The lack of a clearly thought out, liberation-oriented and identifiable community of interlocutors in the AA debate has tended to reduce it to a middle class talk-shop.”<sup>8</sup> In other words a middle class black may not be an authentic black interlocutor. Maluleke (1996) decries the fact that groupings such as rural women are viewed in passive terms in the AA debate for example. He further argues that lack of a consciously selected interlocutor for AA based on the heritage of the liberation paradigm tended to skew the debate to the requirements of big business in South Africa. In essence, the argument by Maluleke (1996) suggests that the flaw in the AA debate was that its interlocutor was a black middle class person rather than the poor non-person.

Immediately, we must then see that there is a shift in the understanding of the non-person to a middle class person as an interlocutor in post 1994. This kind of shift is discernable in a number of discourses that became prevalent in our public life so far. It is needless to give an exposition of the same shifts of interlocution in the well-known notion of “critical solidarity with the state”.<sup>9</sup> At its core, the methodological implication of this notion is that ultimately, the poor are left alone, as the church and the state are in solidarity albeit critical solidarity. Again, the non-person is lost as an interlocutor. In defining blackness, Boesak (1977) once said, “To be black in South Africa means to be classified as a ‘non-white’: a non-person, less than white and therefore less than human.”<sup>10</sup> Placing the AA arguments in post 1994 around black middle classes as Maluleke (1996) argues, and the implications of interlocution in the notion of critical solidarity as I have briefly argued, denuded the notion of non-person of its features. Non-person originally meant that black lives are doomed to second class citizenship, it meant poverty in squalid conditions, and it meant ultimately being less than human. A black middle class does not present all these features of the original understanding of blackness as interlocutor for Black Theology of liberation. On the other hand, we must not forget, the interrelatedness of the categories of the liberation paradigm still remains important to define whether the AA debate and the notion of critical solidarity truly embraced the goals of liberation.

The next example we discuss is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Regarding the concept of justice that was prevailing during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (the commission set by the government of national unity after 1994 to help deal with what happened under apartheid and to promote reconciliation) in South Africa, Mahmood Mamdani’s critique is sharper and provides the cornerstone of this article. He argues that in the two cases of South Africa and Rwanda, there is a noticeable collapse of the paradigm of justice. Mamdani (1998) further argues that there is always a tension between reconciliation and justice.

Too much emphasis on reconciliation, for example, might compromise justice and vice versa. By making justice to be subservient to reconciliation important tenets of justice may collapse and undermine the very reconciliation that might be sought to be achieved. Mamdani’s (1998) seminal ideas are found in his book, *Citizen and Subject* to which I also refer in this article to specifically pursue my arguments on justice and reconciliation. The core of his thesis is that colonial power was a bifurcated state. It was a combination of indirect and direct rule which divided the colonial territory between civil power and ethnic power. While civil power was racialised, customary power in the rural spaces was ethnicised. His prognosis which is similar to a number of theologians in South Africa is that South African democracy requires both the de-racialisation of civil power and detribalisation of customary power for a durable reconciliation to be attained.

In democratic South Africa, one of the challenges we must contend with is the fact that political liberation is a consequence of compromise. The political compromise resulting from the negotiated settlement has impinged on important symbols such as justice which remain important for the durability of our polity and a reconciled society. One example we must avoid is the case of Rwanda, Mamdani (1998) argues. He offers an example of Rwanda to demonstrate the instance when revenge takes precedence over justice. In this case, he argues that the historical rivalry between a Muhutu and a

---

<sup>8</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke, 1996: 316.

<sup>9</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke is one sharpest critics of this notion. He has engaged it fully and one must simply look at the works he has produced in this regard in addition to those that are cited in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Boesak, 1977: 26.

Mututsi in Rwanda saw the institutions of power that were previously Tutsified being Hutu-ised after the social revolution of 1959 in Rwanda. He says, “it is the failure to frame justice within notions of an inclusive political community that turned justice into a permanent preoccupation, a vendetta that increasingly spelt revenge”.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the fact that everything in Rwanda became defined as just only on the basis of the plight of the Hutu, no matter what happened before, reduced justice as a form of revenge by the Hutu against the Tutsi. This form of justice is without reconciliation.

Mamdani (1998) sees this danger in Kadar Asmal’s thinking – the preoccupation that spells justice as revenge – in the discussion of reconciliation in South Africa. To avoid collapsing the norms of justice into a form of revenge was the reason why South Africa decided against taking the route of Nuremberg. South Africa was interested in reconciliation too, not only justice without reconciliation. In other words when justice is viewed as revenge, it becomes easy to abandon reconciliation. However, does this mean that reconciliation must be sought without justice? Surely, following on Mamdani’s (1998) case of Rwanda, justice without reconciliation becomes extremely dangerous and South Africa sought to maintain the tension between justice and reconciliation. Equating revenge to justice, Mamdani (1998) argues, is an error we should however not commit if it is not committed already!

The political compromise in South Africa contributed to what Mamdani (1998) refers to as justice based on “pragmatic political concession”.<sup>12</sup> The characterisation of the South African political settlement as a compromise is not debatable. Kwandiwe Kondlo however must be listened to:

The issue we need to grapple with is the direction and character of change in the context of a negotiated settlement. How do we comprehend theoretically, the nature and character of change and prospects of future changes in South Africa? Two concepts are important to me, in understanding the South African situation, especially the dilemma underlying the national democratic revolution; the first is the *heteronomy* of democratic politics since the end of the cold war, the second the *autochthony* of the liberal democratic state in South Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Kondlo (2011) explains that the heteronomy is about a concentrated form of pragmatism while autochthony refers to the limits of the sovereignty of a state since the dawn of the new world order. In other words, to return to our point, “pragmatic political concession” *a la* Mamdani (1998), renders the South African state to be heteronomous thus eclipsing intellectual reflection and theory while self-interest is occupying centre stage. While political justice must not be rejected, as Mamdani (1998) also cautions, what cannot be overlooked is the capacity of political justice to either enhance or impede social justice. To take his point further, justice in the pragmatic political concession – the heteronomous state – is justice without theory and intellectual reflection shaped only by pragmatic considerations. Mamdani (1998) says:

As a form of power, apartheid undergirded a particular system of privilege. A focus on power that obscures the relationship to privilege leads to accenting the relationship between perpetrator and victim as the minority. But a focus that links power to privilege links perpetrator to beneficiary, racialized power to racialized privilege, and puts at the centre-stage the relationship between beneficiary and victim as majority. To recognize this difference is, I think key to thinking through how to make the reconciliation durable.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, 1998: 10.

<sup>12</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, 1998: 11.

<sup>13</sup> Kwandiwe Kondlo, “ ‘At the Point of a Needle’: The South African Communist Party and the Dilemma of the National democratic revolution in South Africa, 1994 to date” Inaugural Lecture, 24 August 2011, University of the Free State, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, 1998: 14.

Mamdani (1998) further explains:

The distinction between perpetrator and beneficiary, and between victims as the minority and victims as the majority, allows us to distinguish between two forms of reconciliation: one narrow and political, the other broad and social.<sup>15</sup>

One Black Theologian who has come very close to Mamdani's (1998) views discussed so far is Tinyiko Maluleke.

Maluleke (1997) has not only reflected on the Truth and Reconciliation, but also debated such topics like the Affirmative Action as seen above. In the same way as Mamdani (1998) debunks the reductionism of reconciliation, Maluleke (1997) sought through the analysis he gave of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to lament that the process was tantamount to "dealing lightly with the wounds of my people". He argued that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission could not encapsulate the reconciliation of all South Africans.<sup>16</sup> The South African challenge of reconciliation was bigger than the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and could not be reduced to the work of this Commission. This reductionism is the same point that Mamdani (1998) makes on the reduction of the problem between a perpetrator of violent acts rather than the beneficiary of a bifurcated state of colonial and apartheid power. There are various ways in which this reductionism is playing itself out. One example is that history in post-apartheid South Africa is now being reduced to the history of the African National Congress (ANC), while reconciliation is subjugated to forms of amnesty that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission offered. The question of the loss of interlocution or the displacement of the voiceless as the interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation was asked some time ago and those questions remain pertinent even today. Maluleke (1997) goes even further to comment about the silence of the rich even when the angst of the pain of the poor was shared in public during the Truth and Reconciliation processes. The point is simple; the interlocutor is lost in a heteronomous state.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who wrote an interesting book in 1999 with the title, *Toward a history of the vanishing present*, poses a penetrating question in the chapter she has entitled: "Can the subaltern speak?" According to Spivak (1999), a "subaltern" is a person without social mobility.<sup>17</sup> These are people who speak, but cannot be heard. The crux of her argument is that representation is ultimately violent. What fascinates me about her argument is the manner in which she explains the concepts of "a proxy" and that of "a portrait" to debunk the notion of representation. A proxy is one who is "authorised" to represent someone. In the case of representation for the poor, however, to assume that we can represent them (the poor) is to treat them as proxies of our own desires and interests. A clearer question is that of treating the subaltern as our own portraits. In other words, to assume that we can portray the plight of those who are not heard is to treat them rather as our own portraits. To treat the subaltern by proxy and as portraits is violence, at least in so far as Spivak (1999) forcefully argues. For our argument, to accentuate the relationship between perpetrator and victim as the minority is violence as the interlocutor changes in this case. When the relationship between power and privilege is made, then the shift from perpetrator to beneficiary becomes possible. The link between racialised power to racialised privilege becomes vivid. Thus, it becomes possible to put at the centre-stage the relationship between beneficiary and victim as majority.

To recognise this difference as Mamdani (1998) argues is pivotal to understanding the contesting paradigms of justice in South Africa, but also the repercussions of the loss of an interlocutor in our democratic dispensation as violence in a heteronomous state where the subaltern cannot speak.

#### *Voice and voicelessness: interlocution and economic liberation*

Desmond Tutu made a call for a white wealth tax in 2011 at the launch of the *The humanist imperative*, a book edited by John de Gruchy.<sup>18</sup> Well, it is equally accurate to state that this call was made as the Youth League of the ANC through its President Julius Malema, now dismissed by the ANC, was making its position known in their motto: "economic liberation in our life time." There was an economic march which brought thousands of South Africans, the adults and the youth, together as they made their way through powerful economic institutions including the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to record their grievance in 2011. Allan Boesak was on SAfm radio too expressing support of the call for

<sup>15</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, 1998: 14.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tinyiko Maluleke, "Dealing Lightly with the Wounds of my People," *Missionalia* 25:3 (1997): 324-343.

<sup>17</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995): 28.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Murray Williams "Tutu calls for wealth tax on whites" accessed July 2012, <http://www.iol.za/news/politics/tutu-calls-for-wealth-tax-on-whites-1.1116744>.

the white wealth tax. In his upcoming work, there is a chapter that deals with this matter, particularly in relation to issues that have to do with reconciliation. He draws from Mahmood Mamdani's view to challenge the paradigm of justice and thus reconciliation in South Africa. Typical of Allan Boesak, the title of his chapter eloquently captures the problem: "When Ubuntu takes flight: the ongoing search for justice after the TRC." He has presented the thoughts of this paper already in a number of public platforms one of which has been the lecture he gave at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in October 2011. John de Gruchy also entered the debate and published an article in the *City Press* of August 2011 which tackles the matter of wealth distribution in South Africa.

I thought a brief reflection on this matter is appropriate for our topic. I selected an article published in the *Mail & Guardian* in which Leon de Kock apparently responds to Andile Mngxitama who argues that whiteness is related to economic inequalities in South Africa. De Kock (2011) in his article<sup>19</sup> makes important points that echo the deeper layers of divisions that mirror the confusion that has characterised our public since 1994.

De Kock (2011) argues that whiteness is no longer an accurate category to employ as the core of neo-liberal capitalism. He points to China, Arab nations and the emerging economic giants of the Bric countries to discount Andile Mngxitama's apparent charge that the whiteness debate in the *Mail and Guardian* is "ultimately serving to safeguard precisely what it pretends to be examining – whiteness in South Africa". He argues that the debate on whiteness deconstructs rather than consolidate whiteness, thus the importance of class and the inaccuracy of a binary view of black-white divisions in economic inequalities.

De Kock (2011) agrees with Mngxitama that whiteness should not be isolated from economic power in South Africa, but points to what he thinks are the shortcomings in Andile Mngxitama's Black Consciousness based arguments. First, de Kock posits that in global terms, the category of whiteness in relation to economic power is increasingly becoming inaccurate. If this was the case in the previous centuries, it is no longer the case in this century. De Kock (2011) says:

But, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, what began as a "liberal" capitalist project in a neo-colonial global order of whiteness has been appropriated and transformed into a world order of consumer capitalism, the inner core of which can hardly still be identified as white.<sup>20</sup>

As I have already alluded above, de Kock (2011) supports his argument, namely the transformation of the capitalist order whose inner core can hardly still be identified as white, by pointing to China, the Bric nations and Arab nations that continue to show that capitalist greed is colourless. Flowing from this logic, he then argues that even in South Africa the whiteness of capitalism must now be interrogated further as a conceptual category as there are Motsepes and Sexwales who make the debate more complex. Globalisation and the presence of many blacks who are captains of capitalist industries in South Africa have now made the question of race to be complex. De Kock (2011) aptly says:

Articulate, clearly middle class and comfortably ensconced on sofas on the stage of the Market Theatre, Memela and Mngxitama haggled over Steve Biko's definition of blackness — was it pigmentation, or was it political, economic and cultural affiliation? Their very argument, deeply circular, proved the point — which is: It is an inclusive and pointless debate, serving only to entrench already held positions. It is not one or the other. It is "both and" — both pigmentation and affiliation, and still more, in a scene of increasing social complexity.<sup>21</sup>

I am tempted to conclude that de Kock has offered a liberated oriented definition of blackness in the words cited above and thus pointers to the interlocutor of Black Theology of liberation in the quest for economic liberation. His caution against using whiteness as a conceptual category is that "the apartheid binary of a homogeneous whiteness and a uniform blackness" simply takes us back to the old tyranny "upon our lovely, variously shaded skins". In other words, using whiteness as a category simply recedes to arguments informed by the pigmentation of our skins.

Firstly, not every black person can be an interlocutor for economic liberation if the basics articulated by Maluleke (1997) above are to be followed. Secondly, and most importantly, de Kock's (2011) argument is not new. One only has to look at the debates between the various strands of Black Theology of liberation particularly the race and materialist strands to appreciate the relationship

---

<sup>19</sup> Leon de Kock. "Capitalism's Not a White Thing." *Mail & Guardian*, 16 to 22 September 2011, sec. Comment & Analysis, p.31.

<sup>20</sup> Leon de Kock, 2011: 31.

<sup>21</sup> Leon de Kock, 2011: 31.

between race and economics. Thirdly, I am suspicious that the problem at a deeper level is on the distinction we need to make between the perpetrators of economic inequalities and the beneficiaries of these inequalities and between victims of economic exclusion as the minority and victims of economic exclusion as the majority.

This is important because even blacks who are the beneficiaries of the economic systems of exclusion do not and will not exonerate racialised privilege that benefited whites. This must include the common error to exculpate whiteness on the basis of narrow political reconciliation implied in de Kock's (2011) article by the choice of its title: "Capitalism's not a white thing." The silence of the "victims as the majority" confirms only one thing, namely the view of reconciliation from the hegemonic perspective of pragmatic political concession, hence the collapse of justice for the "victims as the majority".

The last point that I would like to make in this regard is the painful truth that Moeletsi Mbeki paints about economic relations in South Africa. He says:

Over the last 200 years South Africa has been ruled by at least four types of political elite:

- Indigenous African aristocracy;
- British imperialists;
- Afrikaner landowners; and
- Black upper class.<sup>22</sup>

Using the notion of an "enclave economy" meaning a system that heavily relies on exclusion but intentionally seeks to benefit the few, Mbeki (2011) argues that this type of an economic system "that Verwoerd was so eloquent about" has hitherto been pursued by the ANC government.

While Verwoerd did not have to worry about the black vote, the ANC does and to keep its votes the ANC must keep its voters poor. This is what Mbeki (2011) explicitly argues. The ANC elite at best are intellectuals and not property owners. They are not the owners of an "enclave economy" and remain powerless as they rather consume instead of produce. Even the beneficiary of this "enclave economy" whose pigmentation is black, remains the minority in a heteronomous state attained through a sustained political pragmatism that benefits a few. If our interlocutor is the majority victim, then the quest for economic liberation cannot escape whiteness as the original problem of an "enclave economy" and political reconciliation as narrow and ultimately injurious to the paradigm of justice that Black Theology of liberation must espouse.

### **Prophetic theology and Black Theology of liberation**

This section will be very brief. While I admit from the very beginning that the two are related, namely Prophetic Theology and Black Theology of liberation, I argue that there are important distinctions we must make if the loss of interlocution is our main concern in post-apartheid South Africa. Prophetic theology is often polemical and confessional. It relies on the interpretation of the root causes of problems and then provides an alternative alluring vision based on the foundations of a particular religious faith. There is nothing wrong with a polemical, symbolic alluring vision and an analysis of root problems within the purview of one's faith.

The connection between Prophetic Theology and Black Theology of liberation has been mainly along these lines when all schools of theology took a polemical stance against the apartheid regime. What seems to be the problem is the mode of this theology in the context of a legitimate state. Gustafson's (1988) work, reinterpreted by Nico Koopman, has been an attempt to expand the tradition of Prophetic Theology to include other modes of moral discourse so as to include rational, apologetic modes of argumentation between prophets and policy makers in public life. This must be encouraged in my view. It is the loss of interlocutor in Prophetic Theology that remains a challenge particularly in the many complaints about the silence of the prophetic voice in public life. Black Theology of liberation, by making a vivid choice of the community of interlocutors, concretises the historical project of the envisioned alternative community by the prophets. In other words, the vision is historicised even though such a choice might be difficult.

This is the choice Black Theology of liberation must make in a heteronomous state. One only needs to read what Dirk Smit's<sup>23</sup> assessment of how key theological components of Western

---

<sup>22</sup> Moeletsi Mbeki, (ed.), *Advocates of Change: How to Overcome Africa's Challenges* (Johannesburg: Picador, 2011): 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Dirk Smit, *Essays in Public Theology* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007): 27-40.



Christianity will never be the same again in South Africa. Notions such as “Word of God”, “justification by faith” and many others must always be tested against the Christianity’s collaboration with the oppressive nature of colonisation, conquest and I include, the “enclave economy.” By its very nature, Black Theology of liberation expanded the contours of Christian faith and sought other sources for the liberation of the poor outside the confines of orthodox Christian tools. So, interlocution is one of them!

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that there is no need to trace the understanding of interlocution in Black Theology of liberation by appealing to the “patriarchs” of the liberation paradigm of theology. This article is not a reassessment of the paradigm but an appropriation of the gains this school made for our South African challenges.

The interconnectedness of interlocution with other components of the liberation paradigm as we have seen, suggests that theological impotence in a heteronomous state might be caused by the reductionism and undue co-optation of liberation symbols in post-apartheid South Africa including the very notion of Prophetic Theology. The comprehensiveness of Black Theology of liberation therefore requires that we should vividly choose between the broader and narrow paradigms of justice in order for the subaltern to speak.

### **Works consulted**

- De Kock, L 2011. Capitalism’s not a white thing. *Mail and Guardian*, 16-22 September.
- Gustafson, J 1988. *Varieties of moral discourse: prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy*. Michigan: Grand Rapids.
- Kritzinger, JNJ 2002. The function of the Bible in Protestant Mission, in Wickeri, Philip (ed.), *Scripture, community, and mission: essays in honor of D Preman Niles*. London: Council for World Mission.
- Maluleke, T 1996. Do I, with my excellent PhD, still need affirmative action? The contribution of Black Theology to the debate. *Missionalia* 24(3): 303-320.
- Mbeki, M (ed.) 2011. *Advocates for change*. Johannesburg: Picador.
- Ndletyana, M 2011. Inequality is the real fuse for white fear. *Sunday Times*, 18 September.
- Smit, D 2007. *Essays in public theology*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.
- Roberts, JD 1983. *Black Theology today*. New York, Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Tefsai, Y 1996. *Liberation and orthodoxy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.