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Black Theology in socio-economic-cultural-political context in South Africa during the period of the Government of National Unity

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The socio-economic-cultural and political conditions under which the black people live warrant ongoing black theological reflection in the context of poverty. Decades after the dawn of democracy in South Africa, black people continue to suffer because of the dehumanising poverty, inequality and unemployment. The majority of those who suffer are black people whose lives have not changed for the better despite promises that are often made by the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC). The promises continue even during the time of the Government of National Unity (GNU) following the electoral losses of the ANC and their initiation of the GNU in 2024. Despite the establishment of the GNU, indications are that black people will continue to live in poverty and that South Africa will continue to be the most unequal society and that unemployment will continue to reach high levels. This article argues that the persistent poverty experienced in black communities in South Africa demands critical theological reflection by pastors and theologians rooted in those contexts. Using the historical-theological method, the article argues that Christian faith in black communities must continue to be articulated from the standpoint of the poor and oppressed, who are the interlocutors of Black Theology. Utilising a situational theological method grounded in the works of Cone, Boesak and Motlhabi, this study examines the socio-theological role of Black Theology under the GNU.

Contribution: The article contributes to discourse related to Black Theology in the context of poverty in the South African context, where the majority of those who are poor are black. The article serves as a corrective discourse that rebuts the perception that Black Theology is an American theology that has no place in Africa.

Keywords: Black Theology; poverty; inequality; unemployment; situation method; Government of National Unity.

Introduction

It remains a matter of academic and theological interest that decades after the political liberation of South Africa in 1994, there are still millions of South Africans who continue to live in poverty. This is notwithstanding some progress in other areas, which are unfortunately overshadowed by the continued prevalence of dehumanising and scandalous poverty in South Africa. Of further interest is that the majority of those who live in poverty are the black people of South Africa, whose lives have not changed for the better. At the dawn of democracy in 1994, hopes were high that the promised '*better life for all*' would be a reality for all South Africans (cf. Buffel 2017:1). Unfortunately, that is not the case as poverty, unemployment and inequality persist. More than three decades after political liberation, poverty and associated inequality and unemployment are still prevalent. This cruel poverty is a great challenge to Christian witness and requires theological reflection in that context. The persistence of racism in South Africa, as well as the associated socio-economic realities, warrants the continuation of black theology of liberation as 'a suitable framework for finding meaning in the pursuit of liberation' (Baloyi 2025:1). This is what Black Theology attempts to do as Vellem (2010:4) argues that '… Black Theology of liberation challenges forms of power, such as racism, patriarchy, sexism and economic exclusion, which perpetuate the oppression of the poor'.

As Steyn Kotze (2022) states: 'South Africans believed that the introduction of democracy in 1994 would transform their lives for the better through equality of opportunities. This has not happened'.

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On 15 March 1994, on the eve of the first democratic elections, the African National Congress (ANC) government (then considered a government-in-waiting) declared the following in its Election Manifesto:

> On 27 April, for the first time in our history, all of us will stand tall and proud as equal citizens in our common home. South Africa's first democratic elections are about our common yearning for freedom, peace and a better life for all. They are about a past of oppression and despair and a future of hope and democracy. There are those who would like us to believe that the past doesn't exist: that decades of apartheid rule have suddenly disappeared. But the economic and social devastation of apartheid remains. Our country is in a mess. (ANC 1994a:1)

On that historical day of the first democratic elections, 27 April 1994, the ANC won with an overwhelming majority vote (63% of the total votes). The main purpose of the government was to rebuild and transform the economy after years of the apartheid regime's economic isolation and financial sanctions, which were enforced by the international community (South African History Online 2017).

According to Baloyi (2025:1), racism remains a persistent and deeply rooted problem in South Africa, years after the end of the apartheid era in 1994. This is not only because of the stubborn legacy of apartheid but also because of government inefficiency and the failure of the government to deliver services, failure to end poverty and failure to create jobs and to bring an end to inequality. Corruption has also played a significant part in taking away resources that could have addressed many of the socio-economic challenges of the country. Phosa (2024), a former leader of the ANC, attributes the failure of the government to corruption:

> Corruption and mismanagement, at all levels of government, have strained our capacity to deliver adequate housing, medical services, infrastructure, electricity and community safety. In this atmosphere, foreign investment, job creation and economic growth have been casualties. (p. 214)

Phosa (2024) continues to state:

> The most obvious, outward-facing examples of our failure are the public enterprises and their traumatic record of poor governance, accountability and transparency. In enriching ourselves, we have stolen from the mouths of the unemployed, the hungry, and those who have blindly and loyally supported us for decades. The money siphoned off from these enterprises by government leaders, the Guptas and others in the private sector could have built thousands of schools, hospitals and houses. (p. 214)

More than three decades after the historic election, 27 April 1994, the promises of '*a better life for all*', are still far from becoming a reality. The country is still in trouble economically, as it was in 1994. During the period of the Government of National Unity (GNU), following the electoral losses of the African National Congress, South Africa is still in a mess, as millions continue to live in poverty.

The slogans articulated in political rallies and in Election Manifestos continue to promise 'a better life for all'.

In the ANC 2024 elections manifesto of 2024, the ANC stated the same promises as in 1994:

> Thirty years ago, South Africa started the journey to a united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous society, which guarantees a better life for all. We have been guided along this journey by our Constitution, which urge us to act together to heal the divisions of the past and build a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights. Our goal is to eradicate income poverty and reduce inequality, so that the wealth of the country is more equitably shared. (ANC 2024:1)

Sadly, poverty has not yet been eradicated. Inequality and unemployment continue to be prevalent. In some respects, conditions have worsened, despite promises made every 5 years before the period of elections. Most of the citizens of South Africa are still excluded from access to land, education, jobs, clean water and decent shelter, in addition to exclusion from the economy of one of the wealthiest countries in Africa (cf. Zacharov et al 2022:7). In 2023, poverty in South Africa was estimated to be around 62%, with 18.2 million people living in extreme poverty (World Bank 2025). The most vulnerable groups include women, black people and those with no education (Africheck 2018; cf. Statista 2024; World Bank 2024). According to McKeever (2024:1), South Africa is the most economically unequal country in the world. Research shows that inequality has only risen since the advent of multi-party democracy in 1994 (McKeever 2024:1). Poverty continues even during the era of the GNU, following the electoral losses of the ANC on 29 May 2024. The ANC, which has been the majority party since the dawn of democracy, lost its outright majority for the first time since 1994.

Poverty in the South African context is associated with the ever-widening inequality gap between the rich and the poor, with South Africa having the distinct reputation of being the most unequal society in the world. South Africa has graduated from being one of the most unequal societies to being the most unequal society in the world, characterised by 'lavish wealth and abject poverty' (ANC 1994b). Poverty and inequality are also associated with a very high rate of unemployment. According to Baloyi (2019:46), South Africa still experiences challenges of high levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment. The unemployment rate stood at an elevated 33.5% in Q2-2024, with women and youth persistently more impacted (World Bank 2024). South Africa has the highest income Gini index globally at 0.63% as of 2023:

> According to the World Bank High inequality is perpetuated by a legacy of exclusion and the nature of economic growth, which is not pro-poor and does not generate sufficient jobs. Inequality in wealth is even higher, and intergenerational mobility is low, meaning inequalities are passed down from generation to generation with little change over time. (World Bank 2024)

Sadly, poverty is still a burden in South Africa as more than 50% of South Africans continue to live in poverty, with 18% living in extreme poverty and with the ever-increasing levels of inequality (cf. Francis & Webster 2019:788). Decades after political liberation, levels of poverty remain unacceptably high, as it was in 1994 when the ANC became a governing party. The changes that were envisaged by the ANC just before they were elected to power remain far from becoming a reality.

It was envisaged in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) Policy Framework that poverty would be eliminated. The ANC socio-economic policy articulated in the RDP policy framework declared in 1994:

> It is not merely the lack of income which determines poverty. An enormous proportion of very basic needs are presently unmet. In attacking poverty and deprivation, the RDP aims to set South Africa firmly on the road to eliminating hunger, providing land and housing to all our people, providing access to safe water and sanitation for all, ensuring the availability of affordable and sustainable energy sources, eliminating illiteracy, raising the quality of education and training for children and adults, protecting the environment, and improving our health services and making them accessible to all. (ANC 1994b:17)

Furthermore, the ANC declared in 1994 that:

> The RDP is committed to a programme of sustainable development which addresses the needs of our people without compromising the interests of future generations. Without meeting basic needs, no political democracy can survive in South Africa. Attacking poverty and deprivation is the first priority of the democratic government, and the RDP sets out a facilitating and enabling environment to this end. (ANC1994b:18)

It is strange that the ANC abandoned the RDP policy framework in favour of macroeconomic and neoliberal policies such as the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) in 1996 and Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) in 2005. In 2010, the New Growth Path (NGP) was introduced (South African History Online 2017). In 2013, the National Development Plan (NDP)-2030 was adopted as the cornerstone and blueprint for future economic and socio-economic development strategy. All the policies are committed to the elimination of poverty and reduction of inequality in South Africa by 2030. It is common cause that poverty, inequality and unemployment persist, with only a few years left before 2030.

Behind the consistently disappointing statistics are people who live in poverty, the majority of whom are black. Pastors and theologians cannot afford to ignore the harsh living conditions in black impoverished communities. They cannot ignore the importance of working side by side with the poor people as they engage in theological reflections in black communities in the context of the scandalous poverty that persists over 30 years after the dawn of democracy and political liberation and after the establishment of the GNU, which was necessitated by the loss of the ANC. In line with the suggestion of various poll data, the ANC lost its majority and only received 40% of the vote in the 29 May 2024 elections. The resulting GNU comprises 11 political parties, including the two biggest parties, the ANC (40.2%) and the Democratic Alliance (21.8%) (SAAIA 2024). More than a year after that, there are no dramatic changes that indicate that progress may be made regarding the eradication of poverty. Thus, the harsh living conditions of black people have not changed.

Black people in this paper refer to all people who were regarded as non-white people and who were racially, politically and economically discriminated against and who were oppressed during the time of the apartheid regime. They are the people who bear the burden of poverty, unemployment and inequality. They are the people whose theological reflections amid poverty, unemployment and inequality are the focus of this article.

The genesis of Black Theology in South Africa

The term *black theology* is of very recent origin, having been popularised by black American theologians such as James Cone in the 1960s (cf. Bosch 1979:221). The term is a phenomenon of the 1960s that has its theological roots in pre-Civil War black church, which appreciated that racism and Christianity were opposites (Cone 1972:29). According to Cone, Black Theology is a religious counterpart of the more secular term 'Black Power' (1972:29). Black Theology is 'to a large extent a theological response by black theologians to the emergence of Black Power' (Moore 1974:1). In the South African context, the secular term that became closely associated with Black Theology is black consciousness in contrast to Black Power (Cone 1972:28: cf. Buffel 2021:8; Pityana 1972:37). In South Africa, the term appeared in 1970 (Bosch 1979:221). Though the term became popular in the 1960s in the context of the United States, and in 1970 in the context of South Africa, the realities that Black Theology grapples with precede the use of the term.

According to Nolan, Black Theology is a theological reflection that developed out of Christian student circles. It emerged out of the 1971 black theological project of the University Christian Movement (UCM) (Nolan 1988:3). It is therefore not surprising that most of the leadership of the black theology project were students and members of the UCM and the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), such as Sabelo Ntwasa, Basil Moore, Mokgethi Motlhabi and members of the Black Consciousness Movement, such as Nyameko Barney Pityana (former General Secretary of SASO), Steve Biko (First President of SASO) and others.

Black Theology continues to be important as black people continue to face poverty decades after their political liberation in the South African context. Black people have always been forced to deal with harsh realities related to racism and poverty, inequality and unemployment. In both the context

of the United States and South Africa, Christians had to respond to the racism, oppression and suffering to which black people were subjected by white people.

Sadly, some African theologians, including the great John Mbiti, view Black Theology as only an American movement that was just copied by black theologians in South Africa (cf. Mbiti 1979:477). In an article entitled: '*An African Views American Black Theology*', Mbiti (1979) states that 'black theology is a judgement on American Christianity and Christianity in general. Ideally, there would be no reason for Black Theology. It was forced into existence by the peculiarities of American history' (Mbiti 1979:477). Mbiti seems to ignore that there were and are still peculiarities of South African history that necessitated Black Theology. At the same time as Americans were grappling with issues related to racism, oppression, poverty and suffering, South Africans were also grappling with the same realities. South Africans may not have been the first ones to give the term '*black theology*', but they had been struggling with the harsh socio-economic-cultural and political realities that were imposed by firstly the colonial powers for centuries and secondly the apartheid regime for decades. Although Mbiti only gives credit to Americans for Black Theology, alleging that Black Theology in South Africa only echoes what was being articulated in America, the truth is that what Black Theology deals with precedes the use of the term 'black theology' in South Africa. It is only the name that originated in 1970, according to Bosch (1979:221). The protest movements against interpretations of the gospel by white people have a long history of prevalence in South Africa (cf. Bosch 1979:221). David Bosch traces Black Theology as far back as several centuries on the African continent (Bosch 1979:220). This is also in line with what is stated by Kretzschmar that 'since the early days of penetration of Christianity into South Africa, Africans and subsequently "Coloureds" and "Indians", have responded to the message of the Gospel' (Kretzschmar 1986:xii). Kretzschmar (1986:2) also argues that black Christians had long been speaking out concerning the church and related socio-economic and political issues. It can never be correct to give an erroneous impression that black people never responded to the message of the gospel without any critical thinking and without any protest until they heard what black Americans had to say in the 1970s. One of the theologians who was centrally involved in the evolution of Black Theology in the South African context, Motlhabi (1972a:1), insists that Black Theology was not a new phenomenon in 1970 in South Africa, as it had been around since the churches from the white West arrived on the South African shores. Granted, the writings of Cone had some important influence on the Black Theology in South Africa. However, it was not Cone who taught the black people of South Africa that they were discriminated against and that they were oppressed. It was not Cone who taught black people that they were treated as less inhumanely. It was not Cone who taught black people that they had been debarred from having a say in the decisions that intimately affected their lives (cf. Mpunzi 1972:106). During that time of the struggle, Mpunzi described the existential situation (*sitz im leben*) as follows (Mpunzi 1972):

> Whites have come to see us as dogs (signs reading 'No dogs or Bantu' are not uncommon). Our blackness has been seen as the sign of our non-humanness. It stands for that which is dark and evil. Our past is seen as a past of barbarism. In fact, we are seen as little more than a troop of baboons with quite remarkably human-like features. (p. 106)

It is not uncommon in South Africa for incidents where white people mistake black people for baboons or other animals. In 2017 (and not 1972), an 87-year-old man from Braemar, South Africa, mistook a black young man for a baboon and shot him with a licensed gun, as reported by the Citizen Reporter. The young man, Bongani Duma, died on the scene (Citizen Reporter 2017). Furthermore, it is reported that incidents of this nature are not unprecedented in South Africa. In 2014, a farmer, Johannes Fourie, was convicted and sentenced to a mere 6 months for unlawful handling of a firearm and shooting of one of his workers whom he mistook for a baboon (Citizen Reporter 2017). In a more recent incident, the Zambian observer reported on 31 December 2024 that chaos ensued at Food Lovers Market in Fourways, Johannesburg, when a white couple called two black women patrons 'baboons' (Zambian Observer 2024). This incident ignited some serious conversations about racism in South Africa. This is a stark reminder of the long road that South Africa must still traverse decades after the dawn of democracy. This is despite the fact that post-apartheid South Africa is officially committed to racial equality (Zakharov et al. 2022:7). Racism and associated discriminatory and excluding practices may no longer be in the statutory books of South Africa and may even be unconstitutional in terms of the *South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996*, but racism, with associated poverty, continues to be alive and kicking.

Black people in South Africa were living in the situation that was calling for a theological response to the oppression, suffering and the racism to which they were subjected. When in their own conferences and seminars, and not an American context, they heard James Cone articulating Black Theology, they said, in the words of (Motlhabi 1972a:1), 'we feel also what Cone says in our bones'. As they 'felt it in their bones', they were fully aware that 'the situation in South Africa is different from the situation in North America and independent Africa' (Motlhabi 1972a:1). (Motlhabi 1972a:1) went on to state: 'Here there is still vicious racism and oppression of black people-i.e. all people whom the ruling whites classify as non-whites'.

Mbiti claims that the first publication about Black Theology in the South African context is no more than an echo of American Black Theology (Mbiti 1979:481). One is forced to differ with one of the most outstanding African theologians of the African continent and state that Black Theology in South Africa is far more than an echo of American Black Theology. Black theology in South Africa has got its own flavour. There is no one uniform Black Theology in the United States (Bosch 1979:221). Equally, in South Africa, Black Theology has its own character, with a variety of trends. Moore (1974:1) concedes that the catch title '*black*

theology' was imported from the United States into South Africa. Moore continues to argue that (Moore 1974):

> [*T*]he content of American theology has not been imported with the title. This is to be expected, for while there are many striking resemblances between the situation of the black *man* in America and South Africa, the differences are almost as striking as the parallels. (p. 1)

In addition, black theologians were not and are still not puppets of American black theologians such as Cone, much as what Cone (1972:481) says resonates with their reflections and with the harsh realities to which they are subjected. Mbiti claims that Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christian living in Africa. That may be the case in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, but not in South Africa, where the harsh living conditions driven by white racism, poverty, suffering and oppression continue to wreak havoc on black lives. Sadly, the harsh living conditions continue unabated under the GNU, as they did under a predominantly black government of the ANC.

Black Theology versus African Theology

Black Theology is not at all in competition with African Theology. The two, Black Theology and African Theology, are not mutually exclusive. Tutu correctly points out that there are similarities between African Theology and Black Theology (Tutu 1979:486). The two are an assertion that we should take the incarnation seriously, as Christianity to be truly African must be incarnated in Africa (Tutu 1979:487). According to Tutu (1979:488), African Theology and Black Theology provide a sharp critique of the way in which theology has been done mostly in the North Atlantic world, where Westerners usually call for an ecumenical and universal theology that they often identify with their brand of theologising. It is as if the Westerners are the only ones who have the capacity to think and to theologise, and others, such as Africans, have nothing to contribute to the enterprise of thinking and doing theology. Both African Theology and Black Theology have been firm repudiations of tacit claim that white is right, white is best (Tutu 1979:489). Tutu argues that African Theology and Black Theology have a great deal to learn from each other and to give to each other. Mbiti seems to suggest that Africans have no business engaging in Black Theology, as this is a North American project. Black Theology cannot and will not become African Theology as it is driven by American Black Theology (Mbiti 1979:481). It is as if when black people read and listened to Black Theology from theologians such as James Cone, they had no agency of their own. Mbiti erroneously claims that Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christian living in Africa, and therefore its relevance for Africa is either non-existent or only accidental. He goes on to state that there is no reason why Black Theology should have meaning for Africa. I argue that both Black Theology, just like African Theology, have relevance and meaning for Africa and for South Africa in particular. Black theologians in South Africa have no intention of making Black Theology become African Theology, as Mbiti alleges. Although Black Theology and African Theology are not identical, they tend to complement each other in the South African context. According to Desmond Tutu (1979), one can be an exponent of both Black Theology and African Theology. Tutu articulates the relationship as follows:

> I myself believe I am an exponent of black theology coming as I do from South Africa. I also believe I am an exponent of African theology coming as I do from Africa. I contend that black theology is like an inner circle of concentric circles. (p. 490)

In a polite and diplomatic way, Tutu dares to differ with a distinguished African theologian of the calibre of John Mbiti (1979) by stating:

> I would not care to cross the swords with such a formidable person as John Mbiti, but I and others from South Africa do black theology, which is at this point, African Theology. (p. 490)

The two may not be the same but are not unrelated. They both have sufficient room for theological reflections in the South African socio-economic-cultural and political contexts.

What is Black Theology?

Black Theology is described as an explicit, articulate and scholarly reflection upon the Christian significance of black suffering and oppression in South Africa (Nolan 1988:3). Advocating for the integration of new voices of black women theologians, Xhinti (2021:1) states that Black Theology is a theology that 'restores human dignity and identity for black humanity, and it needs to be acknowledged and celebrated'. I agree with the critique offered by Xhinti related to Black Theology's disregard of challenges related to sexism and patriarchy (cf. Xhinti 2021:1). Womanist and feminist theologians such as Kobo (2016) must be listened to, as meaningful and total liberation is not possible without the inclusion of women and without addressing challenges of sexism and patriarchy. Women are very central to the lived experiences of black people, and any serious theological reflection related to the situation of the poor and oppressed cannot afford to ignore the voices of womanist and feminist theologians and activists.

According to Boesak (1976:8), Black Theology is a theological reflection of black Christians on the situation in which they live and on the struggle for liberation. This description is not different from the one offered by Cone, who earlier defined Black Theology as a religious explication of the need for black people to define the scope and meaning of black people in a racist society (Cone 1972:28). Cone (1972:32) continues to argue that Black Theology places our past and present actions towards black liberation in a theological context, seeking to destroy alien gods and create value-structures according to the God of black freedom. According to Maimela (1994:182), black theology is a conscious and systematic theological reflection on black experience, which is characterised by oppression and suffering in white racist societies in North

America and South Africa. It is for that reason that there are some striking similarities between Black Theology in the United States and Black Theology in South Africa.

In Black Theology, black people are attempting to come to terms theologically with their black situation, and they are seeking to interpret the gospel in a way that the situation will begin to make sense (Boesak 1976:13). Black Theology is born out of the situation of black oppression and dehumanisation (Maimela 1994:182). This situation, which is characterised by the impoverishment of black people, is not something of the past, as black people continue to be subjected to poverty, inequality and unemployment. They continue to live in impoverished areas, be it in predominantly black townships, informal settlements (squatter camps), rural villages and farms and in situations of squalour in city centres. The black people still live in situations that Boesak (1976:8) described many years ago as 'too horrendous to contemplate'. Those who are employed do not have decent jobs and are underpaid. The poor are unemployed and live on government grants, which are not sufficient to sustain them. Millions do not have decent houses and live in shacks and other dwelling places that are not suitable for human beings. They have no access to decent healthcare services, no decent education and educational facilities, and service delivery is either inadequate or non-existent ([Buffel 2021:8]). They have no choice but to respond theologically as they interpret and reinterpret the gospel in their context of pain and suffering. In the current context of South Africa, impoverishment and dehumanisation occur in a situation where, sadly, the political power is in the hands of black leaders since 1994, albeit with a drastically reduced majority since the 29 May 2024 elections, when the ANC dramatically lost its parliamentary majority.

The black folk who are the majority should no longer be excluded from sharing in the economic pie, but they continue to be impoverished by both the legacy of legal or statutory exclusion and the failure of the ANC-led government to transform the economy (Buffel 2021:8). It is in that context that it is unavoidable for black people to engage in black theological reflection.

It could be regarded as a controversial enterprise to talk about and write about Black Theology in South Africa in the context in which there is supposed to be a rainbow nation and in which there is national reconciliation. It is equally controversial to still have millions of black people living in poverty in a country in which black leaders are in power. What Goba (1988) said during the time of apartheid is still true: 'Doing theology in the South African situation has become a very controversial subject because of its interest in confronting the political realities of the South African situation'.

According to Buffel (2021):

> … the difference is that now it is no longer the white minority apartheid regime, but black people who wield political power have allowed poverty to worsen and continue to affect black people. (p. 6)

It is now black leaders who preside over the suffering of their fellow black people. It is black people who have political power and under whose leadership corruption has found a fertile ground at the expense of the poor. There were periods from 27 April 1994 to 29 May 2024 when the ANC won elections with comfortable margins, including the magical two-thirds majority, but that was not used to change the situation under which black people live.

The situational method of Black Theology

Black Theology is a situational theology according to Moore (1974:5). Black Theology uses a method that is completely different from the classical method of the West. This difference is articulated as follows by Moore (1974):

> The classical theological method of the West, under which most if not all of us have suffered, has been to make a thorough, detailed and academic study of the major sources of Christian doctrine in order, we told, to explore God's revelation. Classically these sources have been the Bible, Tradition, and Reason. Thus, our theological curriculum has taken us through Biblical Studies. (p. 5)

According to Black Theology, the starting point of theological thinking is not the Bible and the doctrines of Christian suffering, but the life situation of black people (cf. Kretzschmar 1986:17). Black Theology does not necessarily focus on questioning the authority of the Bible, but on questioning the traditional (white-dominated) interpretations of the text and on developing a new way, a different way of interpreting the Bible (Kretzschmar 1986:viii).

This situational method of Black Theology is different from the old traditional method, which, according to Frank Chikane, was characterised by a hefty dose of deductive reasoning (Chikane 1985:98). To illustrate his point, Chikane cites Fr Lebamang Sebidi, who said (Sebidi in Chikane 1985):

> The deductive method of reasoning can be likened to a man going about frantically with a bag full of answers (solutions) looking for questions (problems). In this paradigm it is the answers that determine the problems; the latter must adapt and accommodate themselves to the answers. Needless to say, this method is ahistorical and therefore bears characteristics of being essentialist, and unrealistic in its approach to human problems. (p. 98)

This situational method is expressed in the phrase 'doing theology', in contrast to 'thinking theology', which then was a dominant methodology in the developing world (Developing World) (Chikane 1985:98).

According to Chikane (1985):

> Southern African theologians who are part of the Third World and who are committed to the mission *Dei* of saving, redeeming, and liberating the world are beginning to reinterpret the tradition of the Bible and that of Israel in a more progressive way. They are reminding the church that theology is and can only be a reflection on the continuing activity of God in the world. (p. 99)

This methodology affirms the Bible as a record of God's action with the Jews, a record of the struggle, involving the Israelites with their God, for justice and peace (Chikane 1985:99). Furthermore, this theology, with its method, responds to different interlocutors, namely the non-persons (non-beings), the marginalised. These are those for whom society has no place. They are not necessarily the non-persons (no-beings), but they are treated as such by the powerful in society (McAfee Brown in Gutierrez 1983:viii; cf. Cone 1975:5). In his very first book *Theology of liberation*, Gutierrez (1971) correctly asserts that the starting point for theology must be the facts and questions derived from the world and from history (Gutierrez 1971; cf. Ryan 2011:244). Cone (1975:vi) agrees with this when he correctly argues that 'any analysis of the gospel that did not begin and end with God's liberation of the oppressed [*and poor*] was *ipso facto* unchristian'. In his very first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone (1970) identifies liberation as the heart of the Christian gospel and blackness as the primary mode of God's presence (Cone 1997:vii, 1986:1). Liberation is central to the Bible, to the church and to Christianity. To this effect, Cone (1986:vii) says that Christianity is 'essentially a religion of liberation'.

I cannot help but agree with what Malcolm X said about any religion that does not care about liberation (freedom) (Malcom X, cited by Cone 1986):

> I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won't let me fight a battle for my people, I say '*to hell with that religion*'. (p. xiv)

Therefore, theology must be about liberation. Cone goes on to say that it is the function of theology to analyse the meaning of that liberation for the oppressed so that they can know that their struggle for political, social and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ (1986:vii). Any gospel message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ's message and therefore has nothing to do with Christian theology (cf. Cone 1986:vii). Arguing for the link of the 'Christian gospel and liberation' in the context of Black Theology and black liberation, Cone states that 'the significance of Black Theology then is found in the conviction that the content of the Christian gospel is liberation' (Cone 1972:32). Cone goes on to argue that (Cone 1972):

> This means that any talk about God that fails to take seriously the righteousness of God as revealed in the liberation of the weak and the downtrodden is not Christian language. (p. 32)

Black Theology of liberation in South Africa during the Government of National Unity period

Given the socio-economic-cultural and political conditions under which mainly black people live, they cannot avoid having theological reflections as black people in impoverished communities in townships, informal settlements, slums in city centres and rural villages. The current conditions under which black people live in post-apartheid South Africa and during the GNU period cannot be ignored when black people engage in black theological reflection in the context of black experience. What Buthelezi said many decades ago continues to be relevant (Buthelezi 1972):

> No one who is seriously concerned about the future of Christianity in this country can afford to ignore the current quest for a Black Theology regardless of whether this phenomenon has adequately been defined or not. (p. 3)

According to Buthelezi (1972:3), '*black theology*' comes out of an attempt to characterise by means of words or phrases that reflection upon the reality of God and God's Word that grows out of that experience of life in which the category of blackness has some existential decisiveness. Emphasising the significance of God and black theological reflection, Cone (1972) says:

> The significance of Black Theology then is found in the conviction that the context of the Christian gospel is liberation. This means that any talk about God that fails to take seriously the righteousness of God as revealed in the liberation of the weak and downtrodden is not Christian language … To speak of the God of Christianity is to speak of *him* who has defined *himself* according to the liberation of the oppressed. (p. 32)

To be black means to be poor, largely speaking. It means to be a victim of dehumanising socio-economic-cultural and political structures that ensure that poverty continues to wreak havoc in the lives of black people. During the period of the GNU, to be black still means to be poor. It means to live in impoverished communities in black townships, slums and informal settlements and rural villages.

This is in line with what Motlhabi (1972a:56) pointed out many years ago in the context of apartheid South Africa: 'To be Black in our country means in the first place to be the victim of "apartheid"-to be the object of colonization, disinheritance and exploitation'. In the current context, to be black means to be a victim of socio-economic-cultural and political structures, which the political leadership of South Africa has failed to transform.

With statutory apartheid gone, and with the ongoing legacy thereof, as well as the ongoing prevalence of poverty that is affecting the poor, it is difficult to turn a blind eye to black suffering in many of the impoverished areas that are inhabited by black people. Many of the black people in South Africa are Christians in a country where 85% of the population are Christians and 80% of the population are 'black' (black Africans, coloured people, and Indian people) in a country with the poor population of 63.02% as of the 2024 mid-year estimates (Government of South Africa 2025).

Black Theology, according to Motlhabi (1972a:56), seeks to relate God as the creator and the liberator of all people in the context of the religious, social, political and economic situations. According to Motlhabi, Black Theology is not a new theology, nor is it a new gospel Motlhabi (1972a:56).

It is merely a re-evaluation of the gospel message, a making relevant of this message according to the situation of the people (Motlhabi 1972a:56a). It is a reinterpretation of the scriptures in the light of the existential situation of our daily black experiences (1972a:56). Motlhabi continues to argue that '[*i*]ts advocates believe that Christ not only has something to do and offer to my "soul", but to me in my entire situation and condition here and now'. Motlhabi argues that in his incarnation, Christ was identified with the oppressed and the poor of his time for their liberation (Motlhabi 1972b:97).

Black Theology has a lot to do with the suffering of God's people, black people, in the context of South Africa. For that reason, Motlhabi (1972a:57) insists that Black Theology 'is the theology of liberation from suffering'.

Motlhabi (1972a) goes on to cite a resolution of Transvaal Regional Seminar that states that it is:

> [*N*]ot a theology of absolutes but grapples with the existential situation. Black Theology is not a theology of theory, but a theology of action and development. It is not a resolution against anything-except irrelevancy-but it is an authentic and positive articulation on God in the light of our Black experiences. (p. 59)

Maimela stated the following in his address to the South African Council of Churches in 1982:

> It is a sin against God. [*It is sin*] that black people have been sentenced to a life of poverty … overcrowded and crime-ridden townships … and other legalised dehumanisations. (UNISA n.d.:1)

If it was a sin during the apartheid era, it continues to be a sin during the period of the GNU. The difference now is that most of the racist pieces of legislation have been taken out, but the socio-economic-cultural and political structures in which poverty is entrenched are still in place.

Conclusion

The article argues that ongoing efforts must be made to articulate black theological reflection from the standpoint of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised, who are the interlocutors of Black Theology. The article traces Black Theology from its genesis. It is also argued that although American Black Theology had some influence on black theology in South Africa, the realities that Black Theology grapples with precede the use of the phrase '*black theology*' in the South African context. Black Theology as a theological reflection is a necessity in the situation where black people continue to be impoverished since the dawn of democracy in 1994. The situation continues during the period of the GNU, which came into being in 2024. The situation of poverty under which mainly black people live continues to justify Black Theology in the context in which, despite some changes, poverty continues to thrive, and the inequality gap is ever widening since 1994, as South Africa remains the most unequal society in the world. The harsh socio-economic-cultural and political conditions under which the poor people live in South Africa have not changed much since the dawn of democracy. The majority of those who live in poverty are black, that is, people who were regarded as non-white people by the colonial and apartheid governments. Pastors and theologians can therefore not afford to ignore the harsh living conditions under which black people live in the South African context.

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