⊞AOSIS

Exploring racial persistence in South Africa through Black Liberation Theology

Check for updates

Author:
Gift T. Baloyi[1] ®

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Philosophy,
Practical & Systematic
Theology, School of
Humanities, University of
South Africa, Pretoria,
South Africa

Corresponding author:
Gift Baloyi,
baloyigt@gmail.com

Racism remains a persistent and deeply rooted problem in South Africa, years after the end of the apartheid era in 1994. Despite significant progress made, racism endures within institutional structures (public and private), society and interpersonal relations. Its aggressive persistence undermines democratic values and thereby runs counter to the ideals of total freedom, dignity and justice. Racism does not only raise challenges for social progress but brings deep theological questions in relation to the doctrine of creation and the ontology of being. Theologically, racism stands in direct contradiction to the core doctrine of the Christian tradition that highlights the inherent worth of every individual, unity and the ideal of universal humanism. This article examines the enduring reality of racism and its impact on black people through the lens of Cone's Black Theology of Liberation. It also discusses the role of Christian religious communities in dismantling structures and attitudes that create racial injustice in society.

Contribution: While the article is theological in nature, it draws from various multidisciplinary theories to contribute to the ongoing conversation and strategies to tackle the challenges of racism and promote values of unity for social cohesion.

Keywords: Black Liberation Theology; Church; humanism; image of god; James Cone; race; racism.

Introduction

Racism remains a persistent and complex issue that is deeply rooted in the country's history and interwoven into its social, economic and political fabric. The 1994 election was interpreted as a significant turning point in the history of South Africa, where the apartheid regime and its racist doctrines would become subjects of the past. It was a moment in which all South Africans, regardless of race, could vote in anticipation of the long-imagined dreams of total democracy and freedom. This was a period in which figures such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela championed the idea of a *Rainbow Nation* as a vision of unity and harmony among South Africa's diverse, racial, ethnic and cultural groups (Tutu 1996). It is also through this concept that human rights, freedom and dignity would flourish beyond ethnicity, gender, race and class.

However, racism as a multifaceted issue, continues to manifest both overtly and subtly, despite the dismantling of apartheid three decades ago. Racism remains a defining factor in many social settings, with subtle and overt forms of discrimination often shaping interactions between different racial groups (Tewolde 2024:67–92). These experiences reflect not only individual prejudices but broader, systemic issues that are embedded within society. In recent months, South Africa has witnessed numerous cases of racism affecting black individuals across various institutions, sparking national debates and calls for action. Some of the incidents or cases of racism in the year 2024 include among others:

- The incident of racism at the Pretoria High School for Girls in Gauteng province was allegedly perpetrated by white pupils through the sharing of offensive messages about black classmates on a WhatsApp group that was created by and consisted of white learners only.[1]
- The incident at the Table View High School in the Western Cape province, where a teacher allegedly used the *k*-word against a Grade 12 pupil, during a confrontation.[2]

1.See https://www.justice.gov.za/m_statements/2024/20240801-RacismAtSchools.html, viewed on 08 January 2025.

2.See https://www.justice.gov.za/m_statements/2024/20240801-RacismAtSchools.html, viewed on 08 January 2025.

- The incident related to the 'slave auction' of black pupils by coloured pupils at Pinelands High School in the Western Cape province. Such incidents perpetuate harmful racial discrimination and cause a painful reminder of the apartheid regime.[3]
- An incident of the alleged murder of two black women who were reportedly shot and fed to pigs by a white farmer and two workers in Limpopo province is a deeply disturbing example of racism and violence in South Africa. This incident has sparked national outrage and reignited debates about racial inequality and the treatment of marginalised communities in the country.

These incidents highlight the ongoing racial tensions and challenges in the broader South African communities and its institutions. Pillay (2020:2) writes, 'In South Africa, apartheid may be dismantled but it does not mean that racism is gone'.

Racism is not just a method through which hatred is transmitted to others but a phenomenon with profound psychological implications. Some of the implications are multifaceted, rooted in the historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination, prejudice and marginalisation. As racism occurs, it affects people's capacity for self-love and self-worth and thereby brings shame that affects their psychological functioning as normal beings (Sosoo, Bernard & Neblett 2020:570–580).

Most painfully, it makes some unconsciously attempt to escape their black self through the bleaching of their skin, with the hope that they will be acceptable as better humans in society.

Racism affects how people view themselves in relation to the question of being human in the world (Manganyi [1973] 2019). Many find themselves grappling with questions such as, what does it mean to live in a society that constantly reminds you that your skin is not worthy of being human and therefore not sharing in the Image of God? The humanity of black people is questioned not only on the level of being human but also in relation to their authentic reflection of the image of God. Moreover, it denies the truth of the divine likeness by implying that black people are lesser, tarnishing the very essence of what it means to be human. This becomes a theological and moral challenge that contradicts the Christian understanding of humanity's unity in God and the creation story in Genesis 1:27.

Beyond this, there is a theology of skin colour in which black is regarded not only as a symbol of subservience and evil but also as a mark of subhuman status. This theology formed the basis of discrimination and exploitation. In terms of this theology, slavery was supposed to have been decreed by God. Although the explicit motive here was to undermine the humanity of black Africans, it also undermined the very essence of God's creative act. On this point, Asante and Hall (2011:108) point out that some black people were

pushed to despise their own skin colour and resorted to skin bleaching as a means of gaining access to the world that is so anti-black. The constant reminder by colonialists and some missionaries that the Christian God had graced the white people with skin that was pure as opposed to the supposedly impure complexion of black people had a huge psychological impact on many black people.

Therefore, this article discusses the stubborn persistence of racism and its complex implications in the lives of black South Africans from a theological point of view. Firstly, it deals with the concept of race and racism from a colonial influence and how this grew deeper in South Africa's apartheid regime. Secondly, it delves into the work of Frantz Fanon, particularly on the psychology of consciousness, which was fundamental in his liberating agenda. Although Fanon does not write from a theological point of view, his contribution to the question of race and racism is vital especially when dealing with the endless crisis of racism. Thirdly, James Cone's Black Liberation Theology is employed as a suitable framework for finding meaning in the pursuit of liberation.

On race and racism

Race is a subscription to the belief that humanity can be separated into two or more different categories. According to Jackson (1987:6), 'race is fundamentally a social construction rather than a natural division of humankind'. In other words, this division talks about the ideology of propagating white supremacy over black people. This creates a culture in which the existential condition of the black becomes a curse and therefore undeserving of respect. Whiteness is depicted as the preordained master of the black and the world, while the humanity of black people is brought into question. The physical appearance of the black bodies is used as a reason for enslavement and refusal of civilisation. Sithole (2016:29) argues that 'The hate of the Black body is projected in such a way that the Black subject is made to desire an escape from it'. Any integration of whiteness and its culture into black people's lives is at least welcomed in this anti-black world.

Racism as the operating logic of race has no other objective apart from arriving at the goal of 'us' (the superior) and 'them' (the inferior) (Manganyi [1973] 2019:5). In the 'us' and 'them' objectives, whiteness and everything in it is pontified as a norm in which the black people are to accept and live with. It is in the inferior position that black people are relegated and made to think that their existence is dependent on the superior's grace. The idea of 'us' and 'them' penetrated the minds of the black people throughout the periods of slave trade, colonialism and apartheid (in the context of South Africa). This attitude enforced a culture of anti-black people worldwide. The attitude of the colonial system towards black Africans gave birth to the ideology of racism in which the condition of the black is despised and criminalised. The notions of race and racism are sets of ideologies, which '… have grave material effects, severely affecting black people's life-chances and threatening their present and future wellbeing' (Jackson 1987:3). This is so, especially when racism

is known to be changing its shape, and colour but maintain the same objective of exclusion, particularly of black people.

Evans (1992) writes that one of the major objectives of the colonial racial project was to succeed in planting the idea that black people were separate from the question of being human in the world. He states (1992):

> The question of being black was separated from the question of being human by the elevation of the factor of race to a normative status in relation to the human being. Thus, in pre-slavery, pre-colonial Africa, one might assume that the question of being black never arose. (p. 99)

The concept of blackness as a racial identity is a social construct that developed largely through the process of slavery and colonialism and reinforced in the apartheid era (in the context of South Africa). It was designed and introduced by the oppressor not only as a tool targeting the bodies but also for psychological control of the black bodies. It was to perpetuate racial hierarchies and maintain dominance against the black people. Colonialism laid a foundation in which the 'black skin was regarded as *damned* and as one of the reasons of enslavement since the launch of the slave trade…' (Hrabovský 2013:66). The existential reality where black people continue to face racist acts reflects the depth of the colonial project of hate against black people. On this, Sithole (2016) argues:

> Whiteness as the constructor of Blackness through the idea of race, and its organizing principle of removing Blackness outside the ontological scheme of things human, relegates Blackness to the ontological margin of being non-human. (p. 35)

In other words, this relegation of blackness to the ontological margin also means the refusal to permit freedom, dignity and rights to exist in the world of black people. Because black people exist in structures that are deeply entrenched in racism and structures that are exclusionary, it is not possible to argue that black people have absolute freedom. In a context where racism continues to manifest itself either overtly or subtly, that which others call freedom may mean something different if defined from the perspective of the oppressed. If the existential realities of black people on the ground keep holding them hostage, then the implications are that black people are not yet free from colonial and slavery systems. Although black people find themselves in both the post-colonial and apartheid eras, the reality on the ground does confirm that the system of colonialism and apartheid regimes has ended.

Although the real engineering of slavery was for economic reasons, it is important to emphasise that black people were used as cheap labour in building the economic muscles of the Europeans (Asante & Hall 2011:2; cf. Joseph 2019:5). This exploitation of black people was instituted as a '…social system by systematically dispensing workload according to color. Those for outside labor were dark-skinned and those who were light-skinned assumed jobs inside the plantation masters' homes' (Robinson 2011:10). The notion of colour further segregated the already segregated, a clear position of who is acceptable closer to the master between a black lighter and darker skin is given.

'The enslavement of African citizens was responsible for emerging ideologies of white supremacy' (Hrabovský 2013:66). The era of slavery and colonialism promoted the ideas of white superiority and black inferiority throughout the African continent and in the African diaspora. This led to the association of black people with things unnatural, extreme ugliness and undeserving of economic growth and civilisation. Beyond the colonisers' aim to make a profit and build their economy through the bodies of African people and maintaining their white supremacy, they hoped to succeed in creating an impression that lighter-skinned black people were more acceptable than those with darker skin. The separation of black people into these two categories seems to be a divisive strategy that worked and still works to strengthen the dislike of dark skin, by black and white people alike.

The world, which is anti-black, positions the black subject in existential crisis and subjection (Sithole 2016). The physical appearance of darker skin has historically been used to justify and perpetuate psychological and systemic marginalisation. For Sexton (2011:27), it is a 'world structured by a negative categorical imperative'. The inferior category of the black people renders their life to be non-existent and therefore worthless. Drawing from Fonlon, Nyamnjoh (2012:132) argues that 'colonialism is essentially a violent project'. Nyamnjoh (2012) further argues that this colonial project:

> [S]ucceeded in making slaves of its victims, to the extent that they no longer realize they are slaves, with some even seeing their chains of victimhood as ornamental and the best recognition possible. (p. 132)

The colonisers were concerned about leaving a legacy of long-lasting psychological impact on the black souls and their regime of political and economic power. This, therefore, confirms Nyamnjoh's argument that '…colonialism was a violent project'. It is also known that from the coloniser's point of view, it was not a violent project but a '…civilization mission', aiming at the 'cultivation of pagans and savages' (Carter 2008:386). Meaning that, when black people were being enslaved and oppressed in different forms, in the eye of the oppressor it was civilisation.

Implication of racism through the lens of Manganyi

Racism is not merely a vehicle for expressing hatred but a systemic mechanism that psychologically and emotionally paralyses its victims. Racism inflicts psychological and emotional harm, resulting in people developing and becoming comfortable with how the hater views them.

In Manganyi's (1973 [2019]) 'Being-Black-in-the-World', a profound exploration of the lived experiences of black people and their effects under conditions of racial oppression is given. He delves deeper into the psychological effects of living in a racially oppressive society. Manganyi discusses how racism not only imposes external barriers but also invades the inner life of individuals, affecting their ability for self-perception and

mental well-being (cf, Williams 2018: 466–485). The constant exposure to dehumanising stereotypes and systemic discrimination can lead to internalised racism, where individuals begin to accept the derogatory views imposed upon them by the dominant society. When racism is at play, it impacts not only the way people are perceived but also how they perceive themselves, their worth and their place in society.

In its nature, racism undermines the value of humanity on other people of a different skin colour than white. Furthermore, the constant exposure to acts of racism and discriminatory attitudes can lead to internalised racism, where individuals start believing negative stereotypes about their own race, which in turn affects their self-worth and self-esteem (Angu 2023:1–12). The deep internalisation of racism gives birth to unconscious self-hate, manifesting in practices of skin lightening or bleaching. While reasons for the persistent practice of bleaching remain diverse, it appears that the historical prejudice against a darker hue of skin and the perceived social benefits of a lighter skin remain influential considerations even today.

Inasmuch as others could argue that skin bleaching cannot be entirely attributed to colonialism, there is no denying that colonialism had a tremendous influence on how black people are viewed and how they also view themselves even today. Given the significant impact of colonial and slave systems, it would seem that black people have never fully recovered from the psychological damage caused and the inferiority complex introduced then. This system introduced a long-lasting sense of humiliation and self-loathing among black Africans. It is through this narrative in the black psyche that the black body was viewed as '…unwholesome, that the white body is the societal standard of wholesomeness' (Manganyi 1973 [2019]:7). This problem manifests in many ways, including the desire to modify one's appearance to align more closely with the beauty standards of the dominant group, which often glorify whiteness and Eurocentric features.

'The Black man is condemned to a life of perpetual questioning of his being, for he is constantly confronted with a world that denies his humanity' (Manganyi 1973 [2019]:11). This condemnation is further exacerbated by racism, which significantly contributes to stress, anxiety and depression among black South Africans (Harriman et al. 2022:843–857). The experience of being treated as inferior or unworthy solely based on race can lead to feelings of helplessness, anger and frustration. It can also exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness. This indicates that the experience of racism has more damaging implications for the lives of the oppressed. Fanon is one person who also addressed this challenge in his psychological work.

Frantz Fanon on the condition of black people

Frantz Fanon was a revolutionary philosopher, psychiatrist and political theorist whose work focussed on the effects of colonisation and the psychology of oppression. His ideas remain influential in the discussions of post-colonialism, race, identity and liberation. While Franz Fanon was not a theologian and did not engage directly with theological themes, his ideas of resistance, dignity and human liberation influenced and paralleled many of the concerns that Black Liberation Theology was engaged. His critiques of colonialism, the dehumanisation of black people and the struggles for liberation by the oppressed resonate with the core tenets of Black Liberation Theology. James Cone's Liberation theology drew significantly upon Fanon as a liberation theorist (Gibson 2011). It is for this reason that Fanon's work is brought into this theological discussion to understand the challenge of racism that persists in South Africa.

Fanon is best known for his two major works: *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth*[4] (1961). His ideologies encompass a broad range of themes, but they are particularly centred on the psychological and social effects of colonialism and the necessity of revolutionary struggle for decolonisation. Fanon finds himself in a society, which is not only racist but also hostile towards the black people. Fanon's project on *Black Skin, White Mask* is important and necessary in this regard, especially in such an environment, which militates against black people. In this work, Fanon regards colonialism as a total project that did not leave any single part of the black person untouched. He puts a picture of how the negative effects of colonialism look from both inside and outside the mind.

Here, blackness was brought into question and criminalised as the contaminator of whiteness (purity). Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* becomes a method of examining the conscious and unconscious symptoms of racism, which he also participates in as a patient who suffered under such conditions. His work is important especially when dealing with the question of persistent acts of racism in the context of South Africa. In other words, Fanon's work is not only important but relevant and necessary when dealing with the question of being black in a country still trapped in the policies of racism, apartheid and colonial attitude.

Fanon ([1952] 2008) argues that colonialism disrupts and distorts black identity by imposing a false sense of inferiority and by forcing black people to adopt the values and behaviours of the colonisers. This internalisation led to a fractured sense of self and an identity crisis among black Africans. It is from this fractured sense of self and identity crisis that there is, for some, an unconscious desire concealed behind the need for beauty, to escape their black self through skin bleaching. The phenomenon of skin bleaching persists for various reasons that have to do with the fact of blackness. Regardless of the fact that justification for the persistent use of bleaching mostly points to beauty, one cannot deny all historical factors, which led to the abhorrence of blackness as an unwanted being in the zone of humanity.

4.The original French title *Les Damnés de la Terre* meaning, 'the dammed of the earth' provide a clear picture and description of how colonial system viewed black people. They were the dammed of this earth. Anything that is dammed is understood as insignificant and irrelevant despite them being created in God's image. This emphasises the horrible existential condition in which black people were forced to live in by the colonial system.

The 'Mask' in Fanon's book title talks to the facade that black individuals might adopt in order to fit into a society predominantly defined by and through a white lens. This mask represents the act of conforming to the expectations and norms of the colonisers, often at the expense of one's true self and cultural identity. This becomes one of the ways in which to escape the persistent acts of racism. Fanon's work, in this regard, provides a critical framework for understanding the psychological dimensions of racial oppression and how the black respond to it.

Mbembe (2011) writes:

> To read Fanon today means to translate into the language of our times the major questions that forced him to stand up, to break away from the roots and to walk with others, companions on a new road the colonised had to trace on their own, by their own creativity, with indomitable will. (p. 2)

Mbembe is correct in his assertion; Fanon's situation compelled him to act in order to help free the fractured minds of the black people from the phobia of blackness created by the colonial system. In other words, persistent acts of racism must be eradicated through transformative educational curricula and reforms across societal institutions. The colonial construction of the phobia of blackness indoctrinated a sense of inferiority status, apology and recipients of racism. Of course, the fear of blackness arose after the death of black people's cultural origins through colonial psychological methods. These African cultural origins have been destroyed by the rise and domination of colonial systems against black Africans. A colonial system that indoctrinated the psychology of self-hate within black people as a strategy to force them to assimilate whiteness.

Engaging in the political will of the time and taking a stand against a racist society of anti-black people was important to Fanon. Part of the project *Black Skin White Mask,* he employs psychological methods in dealing with the effects of the colonial system in the minds of the black people. To this, Fanon (Fanon 1952 [2008:1]) asks a question on the existential condition of the black people in that; 'what does the black man want?'.[5] At the centre of this question was a significant strategy for '…releasing possibilities of human existence and history imprisoned by the colonisation of experience and the racialization of consciousness' (Sekyi-Otu 1996:17). Fanon's approach was to correct the mindset that labelled blackness as an object, determined by whiteness.

It was a determination without the voices of black people themselves as Fanon (1952 [2008:87]) captures it, 'I am given no chance. I am over-determined without'. Fanon becomes two in one in that he gives a diagnosis yet remains a patient in this project of dealing with colonial and racial effects in the mind. Fanon (1952 [2008:88]) states: 'my blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, perused me, disturbed me, angered me'. The anger was not necessarily

arising out of his blackness, but out of being defined and determined by whiteness without his voice being heard, without being told who he, as a black person is. It was a determination of his black life without him having the right to correct that unjust colonial definition of blackness.

Fanon (1952 [2008:257–258]) argues that colonialism has destroyed people's ability to grasp the ontology[6] of blackness. This colonial system made it virtually impossible for black people to grasp the essence of what it means to exist as a black person. A world characterised by anti-black attitudes positioned itself to exclude black people from humanity. In alignment with this view, Maldonado-Torres (2008:104) summarises it as the 'antithesis of being' in the world. This is probably so because, in the worldview of the colonised black people, there is an impurity, which makes it impossible for one to have any ontological explanation. Fanon (1952 [2008:82]) comments on this in that 'the ontology of the black subject exists in the wayside'. This confirms that, within the context of colonial systems and white supremacy, skin colour communicates one's position to and within the dominant power structure. As a result of this reality, many black people subjected to white domination, colonisation and enslavement tended to internalise a sense of inferiority complex based on their skin colour, which is blackness.

The colonial systems had forced the black people to live in comparison and in the hope that one day they will become like the white colonisers (Fanon 1952 [2008]). A wish that would not have occurred freely if not forced by the impression that whiteness is life, beauty, intellect, purity, closer to the divine and that it is the 'predestined master of the world' (1952 [2008:97]). This compels the black people to constantly justify their existence as black people. Surely, this has a potential to cause damage in one's cognition. Fanon (1952 [2008]) points out the danger of this cognitive damage:

> His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be a self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behavior is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as a man. (p. Xiii)

Between the eras of Fanon and now, people may celebrate that colonialism has been defeated. But has it? Has it been defeated consciously and unconsciously? The period of colonialism may have been abolished; however, the psychological impact it had on black people is confirmed through different phenomena including the continuous experience of racism that it is still in existence. In attempting to decolonise the mind, one must first understand the extent of the damage brought by the colonial system and how such became a tool to control the minds of the black people. It is, therefore, the restructuring of consciousness that becomes central in the decolonisation process. The process of decolonising the mind involves dismantling the psychological, cultural and ideological frameworks imposed by colonial

---

5. A reformulation of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis question on the relationships of ontology and desire, 'Was will das weibs? What does the woman want?', with a prefix, asking, 'What does a man want?' (Fanon 1952[2008:1]).

6. In philosophy, ontology refers to the part of metaphysics that deals with thinking about the nature of things as they are. Thinking about blackness in ontological terms means asking questions like 'What is blackness?' and 'What does it really mean to be black?' Therefore, the difficulty inherent in grasping the ontology of blackness is that it has historically been defined Euro-centrically – that is, *by* European white people and *in relation to* whiteness.

systems. It requires a deep understanding of how colonialism operated as a tool of domination, not just through political and economic means but also through cultural and mental subjugation.

Cone's liberation theology: An essential framework

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone (1975:3) makes it clear that his 'theological reflections are inseparable from the Bearden experience'. The Bearden was a place where he encountered harsh realities of injustice that many black people were also subjected to daily. He states, 'Because I have lived the Bearden experience, I cannot separate it from my theological experience' (Cone 1975:5). It was this lived experience that compelled him to critically engage the bible and pose critical questions about the meaning of life in relations to the condition of black people on the ground. In other words, his was a lived experience where black people's humanity and authenticity were questioned through the lens of racism. Cone's theological work became a hermeneutic for understanding Christ's liberative act in the face of human suffering. He saw an inseparable intersection between theology or the Christian gospel and the personal contexts of its audience.

On this, Cone (1975) enquires:

> …What has the gospel to do with the oppressed of the land and their struggle for liberation? Any theologian who fails to place that question at the center of his or her work has ignored the essence of the gospel. (p. 9)

This question is a crucial reminder that theology is not to be understood as an abstract science with no meaning in the life of its recipients; it should rather be understood as a source of empowerment, closely linked to experiences of struggle, survival and resistance. If theology is to be understood as truth, it must reverberate within a context that gives it meaning and relevance. According to Cone (1975):

> There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience. Truth in this sense is black truth, a truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people. This means that there can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point. (p. 16)

In other words, when theology engages sincerely with the realities of racism, it is bound to scrutinise the doctrine of creation in a manner that affirms the inherent dignity and worth of every person and calls out racial oppression as a contradiction of this doctrine. In the fight against racism, it is imperative to understand that the task of truthfulness in Christian theology and the church is both a moral obligation and a testament to their authenticity. In theology, truthfulness means unmasking and challenging the dehumanising ideologies that inspire racism and other forms of oppression. On this, Cone (1975:57) argues that 'there is no truth about Yahweh unless it is the truth of freedom as that event is revealed in the oppressed people's struggle for justice in this world'. God's truth is inclusive of the fact that humanity

bears the image of the divine God, and anything outside this truth is no truth about who Yahweh is to humanity.

Therefore, this truth about God should be spoken to correct all misleading theologies that justified acts of racism and offer a clear, consistent vision of human dignity rooted in the imago Dei in every person. The church, as a vehicle through which this truth is delivered in communities, must move beyond rhetoric towards action that seeks to dismantle the crisis of racism in different communities. In doing so, theology or the Christian gospel would be made meaningful as it identifies and acts with communities. This would make sense as Cone (2010) argues:

> Theology is always identified with a particular community. It is either identified with those who inflict oppression or with those who are its victims. A theology of the latter is authentic Christian theology, and a theology of the former is a theology of the Antichrist… (p. 6)

He argues that theology cannot afford to be neutral or abstract in a context where matters of justice are concerned. A theology that does not care to speak the truth in search of justice in the context of oppression cannot be viewed as authentic but pseudo-theology. One that is totally against the Christian principles. In this regard, pseudo-theology often arises when biblical teachings are manipulated or selectively interpreted to justify and or ignore systemic injustices, allowing those in power to maintain oppressive structures under the guise of religious authority. In the context of racism, pseudo-theology allows the church to ignore the experiences of the marginalised people who are denied their inherent dignity and their right to enjoy life in fullness. Pseudo-theology allows the church to close its eyes when acts of racism are being perpetuated against others in society. Where acts of racism take centre stage, authentic theology has a responsibility, through the church and academia, to speak in solidarity with those who suffer under oppressive and hateful structures.

The persistence of racism cannot be divorced from the manipulative colonial pseudo-theology that tended to racialise the image of God. Through its pseudo-theology, it presented a God who was synonymous with colonial authority and oppressive ideologies against the black people. In other words, humanity was to be described through boundaries or the walls of this colonial creation of the image of God. Through this, an impression is created that blackness lacked qualities that fundamentally display the image of God. Therefore, anything outside this colonial description belongs to the zone of non-humans. Behind the operating strategies of racism is a continuous belief and subscription to the colonial doctrine, which views black people as underserving of the image of God. This has profound theological implications as it creates misleading and contradiction between the God of the colonisers and the biblical God of justice.

It is for this reason that Cone (2010:9) argues, 'Christian theology cannot be separated from the community it represents'. It is in the community where faith is lived or

experienced, internalised and fully realised. It is also through the community that theology is made more meaningful and relevant. In other words, communities give theology its voice, its context and its means of action, making it a dynamic, collective expression of faith. If theology in the context of South Africa is to be meaningful, it must appreciate the need to engage and destroy the persistent acts of racism and other forms of discrimination against black people. This will make theology relevant and contextual as opposed to it being an abstract set of ideas, disconnected from the lived realities or experiences of the people and their communities. It will also be understood as a reflection of God's revelation that is deeply rooted in the struggles, hopes and realities of the people it serves. If it is born out of the lived experience within the communities, it must, therefore, speak to the concrete realities on the ground.

If by contrast, theology deems it fit to address questions of '…what the gospel has to say to a man who is jobless and cannot get work to support his family because the society is unjust' (Cone 2008:43), one could similarly argue that theology has a duty to address the persistent problem of racism. Same way as theology must deal with the problem of gender-based violence and many other forms of oppression that dehumanise and abuse other human beings.

Cone's Black Theology developed from the context of an African American situation where suffering and racism were a lived reality. South Africa is not far removed from that situation as the fight for racism is a continuous struggle. Cone (1970:92) argues that 'Black Theology emphasizes the right of black people to be black and by so doing to participate in the image of God'. This emphasis becomes a helpful tool against the racist doctrine which denies others access into the image of God. As Cone (2010) states:

> In a racist society, God is never color-blind. To say God is colour-blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, to good and evil. (p. 6)

This assertion strongly critiques the idea of a 'colour-blind' God as a denial of the need for justice, arguing that there is no neutrality in God's engagement with humanity. God is seen as actively working against systems that devalue people based on race.

Cone's Black Theology, therefore, provides a powerful framework for understanding and resisting all forms of oppression. His framework insists that authentic Christian theology must actively oppose systems of oppression, be it race, gender and class. Black Theology cannot serve as a liberative frame from the pulpit but should confront white supremacy, both in society and within the church. The idea of a 'liberative frame from the pulpit' suggests that religious leaders, especially in Christian contexts, should approach preaching in a way that promotes liberation, justice and freedom for oppressed communities. In this context, addressing white supremacy is critical, both as a societal issue and within the structures of the church itself.

Implications of liberation theology for the church and its praxis

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'. In other words, this is not just any theology but a contextual one that addresses injustices and restores human dignity.

James Cone's theology highlights that liberation is central to the Christian message as seen in the life and teachings of Jesus. In other words, Cone's theology is one that calls for transformation on both personal and societal levels in a quest for a just society. This draws us closer to the significance of Christ's ministry that was defined by presence and action as opposed to rhetoric. Christ's teachings throughout the gospels provide a model of liberation in practice. This, therefore, makes the task of liberation realistic and meaningful especially to those living in conditions of oppression and marginalisation. Liberation theology must, fundamentally, be grounded in praxis that combines both reflection and action with the purpose of transforming a particular situation. Nwadialor and Nweke (2013) state:

> The hour of liberating struggle has struck for the African church. It has to engage itself also in the political, economic, social and cultural liberation of the people in transforming societal structures which breed humiliation, agony and death for a large section of African communities. (p. 92)

This suggests that both theologians and the church are faced with a huge task to live out this theology beyond the rhetoric. Maluleke (2008:4) profoundly states '…God does not do theology, human beings do…' and it is in the process of doing such theology that the liberation of black people should be found. In discussing Tutu's theological position, Maluleke (2019:186) states that Tutu believes '…the Bible reveals a God who takes sides with the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised'. Though God is understood as a liberator who sides with the oppressed, human beings are responsible for acting out these liberative acts.

As racism remains the greatest concern that gulfs humanity, the church cannot ignore the task of engaging and contributing to social cohesion. Modise (2020) talks about the church as an institution with a moral duty in society. Modise sees 'the church as one of the societal institutions that ought to address racism in South Africa' (2020:6). In other words, the church must be more action-orientated than rhetorical. When rhetoric replaces action, the task of theology loses its power to effect meaningful change and thereby risks becoming disconnected from the lived realities of those it seeks to serve. When the Church moves beyond words and becomes action-orientated, this becomes ministry of presence and action. It becomes a ministry that aligns itself with the heart of Christ's mission: to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and the fullness of life to all. Nwadialor and Nweke (2013) remind us that:

> The point of it all is that, a commitment to liberation theology and its development in African context must mean for the African church a new sense of awareness of the plight of the poor. In effect, what is required of the African church is action, not words…. (p. 92)

Liberation theology finds its profound meaning when its liberative ethos connects with people on the ground and resonates with their various life crises. As Aguilar Ramírez and De Beer (2020:5) state, 'Liberation theology has a tradition of involvement in the struggles of people facing injustice'. This is not just an involvement but one that is able to address the crisis with the people in action.

Perhaps the church must revisit Desmond Tutu's (1996) ideals of the 'Rainbow Nation of God' as it suggests to the church a vital foundation and optimistic model to employ in the continuous fight against racism in South Africa. Though this ideology has been critisised for its failure to address structural inequality and its tendency to silence people's experiences of oppression (Maluleke 2001:191–197), it does not take away the dreams and hopes for the oneness of humanity. It challenges individuals and institutions, such as the church, to live in faithful anticipation of this vision by embodying its values in their daily lives. While the fulfilment of these ideals remains in the future, they serve as a powerful guide, reminding society of its collective responsibility to strive for a world marked by equality, love and mutual respect.

Conclusion

The persistence of racism in South Africa remains a serious concern, deeply rooted in the country's history of colonialism and apartheid. Racism operates as a colonial legacy from an anti-black world that positioned African people as objects within a structure fortified by race and oppression. This dehumanisation led to a loss of self-pride among black individuals, fostering an internalised belief in whiteness as a symbol of power, privilege and divine favour. While the colonial era has ended, the enduring visibility of racism as a project of colonial ideology keeps its presence alive in South Africa's institutions and society. From a theological perspective, racism fundamentally contradicts the doctrine of creation and the imago Dei, which asserts that all people bear the image of God. This doctrine challenges humanity to recognise and respect the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. The works of thinkers like Fanon, Manganyi and Cone are vital in addressing the psychological and spiritual damage inflicted by white supremacy.

Furthermore, Cone's liberation theology serves as a vital framework for confronting social injustices faced by black communities and humanity. It challenges the church and theology to actively participate in the fight against racism, striving for a just and equitable society. As a communal institution, the church is called not only to proclaim liberation but to embody it in solidarity with oppressed communities. In doing so, it fulfils its mission to manifest God's justice and love in a fractured world. By embracing the principles of liberation theology, the church can become a transformative force against racism, nurturing a society where all individuals are recognised as equal bearers of the divine image.

Acknowledgements

References

Aguilar Ramírez, J.D. & De Beer, S., 2020, 'A practical theology of liberation: Mimetic theory, liberation theology and practical theology', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 76(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.6165

Angu, P., 2023, 'Being black and non-citizen in South Africa: Intersecting race, white privilege and afrophobic violence in contemporary South Africa', *Sociology Compass* 17(9), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13123

Asante, M.K. & Hall, R.E., 2011, *Rooming in the master's house: Power and privilege in the rise of black conservatism*, Paradigm Publishers, New York, NY.

Carter, J.K., 2008, *Race: A theological account*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Cone, J.H., 1970, *A black theology of liberation*, Lippincott, Philadelphia, PA.

Cone, J.H., 1975, *God of the oppressed*, Seabury Press, New York, NY.

Cone, J.H., 2008, *Black theology and black power*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.

Cone, J.H., 2010, *A black theology of liberation*, Fortieth Anniversary edn., Orbis Books, New York, NY.

Evans, J.H., 1992, *We have believers: An African-American systematic theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Fanon, F., 1952 [2008], *Black skin, white masks*, transl. C.L. Markmann, Pluto, London.

Fanon, F., 1961 [2001], *The wretched of the Earth*, Penguin, London.

Gibson, N.C., 2011, *Fanonian practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo*, UKZN Press, Durban.

Harriman, N.W., Williams, D.R., Morgan, J.W., Sewpaul, R., Manyaapelo, T., Sifunda, S. et al., 2022, 'Racial disparities in psychological distress in post-apartheid South Africa: Results from the SANHANES-1' survey', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 57(4), 843–857. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-021-02175-w

Hrabovskỳ, M., 2013, 'The concept of "Blackness" in theories of race', *Asian and African Studies* 22(1), 65–88.

Jackson, P., 1987, *Race and racism: Essays in social geography*, Routledge, London.

Joseph, C.L., 2019, 'The meaning of James H. Cone and the significance of black theology: Some reflections on his legacy', *Journal of Religion and Theology* 3(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.22259/2637-5907.0302001

Maldonado-Torres, N., 2008, *Against war: Views from the underside of modernity*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Maluleke, T.S., 2001, 'Can lions and rabbits reconcile? The South African TRC as an instrument for peace-building', *Ecumenical Review* 53(2), 190–201. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2001.tb00095.x

Maluleke, T.S., 2008, 'May the black god stand please!: Biko's challenge to religion', in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander & N.C. Gibson (eds.), *Biko lives!: Contemporary black history*, pp. 115–126, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Maluleke, T.S., 2019, 'Tutu in memory, Tutu on memory strategies of remembering', *Missionalia* 47(2), 177–192. https://doi.org/10.7832/47-2-342

Manganyi, N.C., 1973, *Being-black-in-the-world*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg.

Mbembe, A., 2011, *Fanon's nightmare, our reality*, viewed 03 November 2024, from http://mg.co.za/article/2011-12-23-fanons-nightmare-our-reality.

Mngxitama, A., Alexander, A. & Gibson, N.C. (eds.), *Biko Lives!. Contemporary Black History*, pp 115–126, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Modise, L.J., 2020, 'Racism as a challenge for church and society in democratic South Africa: Human dignity perspective', *Theologia Viatorum* 44(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v44i1.35

Nwadialor, K.L. & Nweke, C.C., 2013, 'The relevance of the Church in oppressive situations: The praxis of liberation theology', *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies* 10(1), 79–96. https://doi.org/10.4314/og.v10i1.5

Nyamnjoh, F.B., 2012, 'Potted plants in greenhouse: A critical reflection on the resilience of colonial education in Africa', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47(2), 129–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909611417240

Pillay, J., 2020, 'Wither black theology of liberation? Perspectives from the late Professor Vuyani Vellem', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(3), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.6232

Robinson, P.A., 2011, 'Skin bleaching in Jamaica: A colonial legacy', Doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University, Texas.

Sekyi-Otu, A., 1996, *Fanon's dialectic of experience*, Harvard U.P, Cambridge, MA.

Sexton, J., 2011, 'The social life of social death: Afro-pessimism and black optimism', *InTensions* 5, 1–47. https://doi.org/10.25071/1913-5874/37359

Sithole, T., 2016, 'The concept of the black subject in Fanon', *Journal of Black Studies* 47(1), 24–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934715609913

Sosoo, E.E., Bernard, D.L. & Neblett, E.W., 2020, 'The influence of internalized racism on the relationship between discrimination and anxiety', *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 26(4), 570–580. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000320

Tewolde, A.I., 2024, 'Racial discrimination in post-Apartheid South Africa? The stories of coloured people in Johannesburg, South Africa', *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 24(12), 67–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/13582291241246964

Tutu, D.M., 1996, *The rainbow people of God: The making of a peaceful revolution*, Random House Publishing Group, Cape Town.

Vellem, V., 2010, 'Prophetic theology in black theology, with special reference to the *Kairos* document', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 66(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.800

Williams, D.R., 2018, 'Stress and the mental health of populations of color: Advancing our understanding of race-related stressors', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 59(4), 466–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146518814251