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Black Theology of Liberation: Faith and socio-economic justice in South Africa's struggles

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The connection between faith and socio-economic justice in post-apartheid South Africa remains a critical area of discourse, requiring focused theological analysis. This article specifically examines how Black Theology of Liberation must evolve beyond its traditional role in resisting racial oppression to actively confront contemporary economic injustices. It addresses the challenges of poverty, systemic inequality and intra-black economic divisions in black townships and villages, emphasising their impact on health, education, social cohesion and economic mobility. Using the framework of Black Theology of Liberation, this study critically engages neoliberal capitalism, corporate exploitation and the failure of post-apartheid economic policies to deliver justice for marginalised black communities. It argues that a renewed Black Theology must move beyond historical racial struggles to actively challenge economic exclusion and demand redistributive justice, land reform and poverty alleviation. By narrowing its focus to these key socio-economic challenges, the article highlights the transformative potential of faith traditions, particularly Christianity, in shaping a prophetic vision of justice. It contends that Black Theology of Liberation remains a necessary voice for economic liberation, calling for an urgent theological response to the deepening inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Contribution: This article aims to address the challenges that black communities continue to face three decades after the dawn of freedom and democracy. It will utilise the Black Theology of Liberation to advocate for prophetic activism in the quest for the liberation of black people, while exploring the intersection of faith and socio-economic injustices within contemporary South African struggles.

Keywords: Black Theology of Liberation; black people; black church; social injustices; apartheid; poverty.

Introduction

This article explores how Black Theology of Liberation engages with and responds to the pressing socio-economic injustices faced by black South Africans today. Three decades after the end of apartheid, economic inequality remains deeply entrenched, with many black communities still experiencing poverty, land dispossession and systemic exclusion from economic opportunities. While the political liberation of 1994 was widely celebrated, the anticipated economic transformation has largely failed to materialise, leaving many in conditions of economic oppression which demand a continued theological response. Baloyi (2019:46) notes that the arrival of freedom in 1994 was interpreted theologically as a liberating act of God. However, South Africa continues to grapple with a myriad of injustices, including systemic racism, economic inequality and social injustice. This perspective views South Africa's transition to democracy as a divine intervention that dismantled apartheid's oppressive structures. However, while political liberation was achieved, socio-economic justice remains an ongoing struggle. Many theologians argue that true liberation, as envisioned by Black Theology, extends beyond political freedom to include economic empowerment, social equality and human dignity. This raises critical questions about the role of faith communities in addressing persistent inequalities and advocating for holistic liberation in contemporary South Africa.

One of the key forces sustaining these economic inequalities is neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal capitalism refers to an economic model that prioritises free markets, privatisation and minimal

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state intervention in the economy. While it promotes economic growth, it has also deepened inequality by limiting state-driven redistribution efforts and favouring corporate interests over marginalised communities. In South Africa, neoliberal policies have failed to address post-apartheid economic disparities, reinforcing structural exclusion.

While much of Black Theology's earlier discourse focused on resisting racial oppression under apartheid, this article argues that its relevance extends beyond historical struggles to address new and persistent economic injustices. Post-apartheid South Africa presents challenges that go beyond racial discrimination, including the rise of intra-black economic divisions, the entrenchment of neoliberal capitalism and the structural inequalities perpetuated by global economic systems. These issues require a renewed Black Theology that does not merely critique historical racial injustices but also actively interrogates the economic realities that shape black life today.

To achieve this, the article engages with the works of Boesak, Vellem, Maluleke and Motlhabi, who highlight the need for Black Theology to adapt its prophetic voice to address economic apartheid, class stratification and political failures in South Africa's democratic era. In doing so, this study argues that Black Theology of Liberation must move beyond a retrospective focus on apartheid to actively challenge corporate exploitation, economic exclusion and the failure of post-apartheid leadership to deliver socio-economic justice.

Therefore, this article, firstly, aims to trace the development of Black Theology of Liberation, highlighting its historical emergence, key theological themes and its evolving role in post-apartheid South Africa. Secondly, it seeks to demonstrate how this theology continues to challenge systemic injustices while fostering socio-economic transformation. Lastly, it explores how Black Theology equips faith communities with a prophetic voice to advocate for justice, empowerment and the restoration of dignity among marginalised groups. Through this analysis, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the enduring relevance of Black Theology in shaping a more just and inclusive society within the South African context.

The emergence and evolution of Black Theology in South Africa

While Black Theology and Black Consciousness are distinct movements, they are deeply interconnected, as Black Consciousness significantly influenced the formation and development of Black Theology in South Africa. Maimela (1984) provides insight into the socio-political and historical factors that led to the development of Black Theology in South Africa. Maimela (1984:) writes:

> the emergence of Black Power or Black Consciousness, as Blacks would prefer to call it, as an articulated and sophisticated form of Black resistance to White power structure, created a new theological climate in South Africa, a climate that swept through many churches with largely black membership. (p. 45)

Maimela's statement highlights how the rise of Black Power or as preferred in the South African context, Black Consciousness, was more than just a political movement but also had significant theological implications (cf. Motlhabi 2008:23–25). In other words, this underscores the fact that Black Consciousness was not just a political ideology but also deeply influenced religious thought and practice, especially within black-majority churches. It created a 'new theological climate' by challenging the distorted interpretations of the Bible promoted by the colonial and apartheid regimes, which oppressed black people and hindered their development, economic empowerment, right to dignity and overall well-being. On this, Maimela (1984:) writes:

> Black Christians gave birth to what is commonly referred to as Black Theology, which seeks to interpret their oppressive conditions in the light of the biblical witness to a God whose justice requires that the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden be set free. (p. 45)

This talks to the idea that rather than accepting a one-sided and misleading interpretation of Christianity that often-justified racial oppression, Black Theology sought to reclaim the biblical witness of a just God who stands with the poor and the oppressed. Rooted in the Exodus narrative and Jesus' mission to set the captives free, this theology emphasised that faith must be actively engaged in the struggle for justice. It rejected the notion of passive endurance of suffering and instead called for resistance, transformation and liberation. By interpreting scripture through the lens of black suffering and resilience, Black Theology became a powerful tool in both religious and political movements with broader liberation struggles.

For many black people in South Africa, Black Theology of Liberation represents more than a theological concept; it embodies their past, present and future experiences. The emergence of Black Theology in the early 1970s, as stated by Maimela (1984) earlier in the text, was a direct response to the systemic oppression enforced by apartheid – a capitalist framework that upheld white supremacy and marginalised black individuals. This oppressive regime permeated all aspects of society, including theological education (Edward 2011:64). Consequently, Black Theology was established as a counter to this racial repression, aligning with African Theology, which developed as a reaction to colonial rule.

While Black Theology was viewed as a significant development in South Africa, other theologians such as John Mbiti questioned the relevance of Black Theology, arguing that it was overly focused on American socio-political issues (Mbiti 1993:379–384). In his earlier work, Mbiti (1979) argues:

> Black Theology is a painful phenomenon in the history of the Church … because it has emerged in an America that, since the arrival of the Pilgrims in the seventeenth century, has claimed to be a Christian country. Black Theology is a judgment on American Christianity in particular and Christianity in general. Ideally there would be no reason for Black Theology. It was forced into existence by the particularities of American history. (p. 477)

While Mbiti acknowledged the socio-political urgency that gave rise to Black Theology, he remained sceptical of its long-term theological value for Africa. He called for a broader African Theology that embraced African religious heritage, addressed the holistic needs of African Christians and moved beyond the racial dichotomies of Black Theology. He argues that 'It is necessary to remind oneself that racial color is not a theological concept in the Scriptures' (Mbiti 1979:478). On this, he strongly stresses that 'Without the American history of slavery, racism and domination by whites … there could be no Black Theology' (Mbiti 1979:479). According to Mbiti (1979):

> It is not at all clear where Black Theology is supposed to go. Black Theology is deeply 'eschatological', yet its eschatological hopes are not clearly defined. There is no clue as to when one arrives at the paradise of 'liberation'. One gets the feeling that Black Theology has created a semi-mythological urgency for liberation that it must at all costs keep alive. As a result it seems that Black Theology is avoiding other major theological issues not directly related to 'liberation'. (p. 479)

Mbiti critiques Black Theology for neglecting major theological issues unrelated to liberation. He believes that, by focusing almost exclusively on political and social justice, it overlooks fundamental Christian concerns such as salvation, sin, grace and the nature of God. For him, this kind of theology is not sustainable as its focus and scope are not clearly defined. He advocates African Theology as the kind of theology that provides scope in its reflection. He finally argues that African Theology (Mbiti 1979):

> […] grows out of our joy in the experience of the Christian faith, whereas Black Theology emerges from the pains of oppression. African Theology is not so restricted in its concerns, nor does it have any ideology to propagate. (p. 481)

In response, Tutu starts by posing a question that addresses Mbiti's last quotation stated earlier in the text, and he writes 'But is this borne out by a study of the history of Christian doctrine?' (Tutu 1979:485–486). Tutu (1979) goes on to argue that:

> Most New Testament commentators appear to agree that the Epistle to the Galatians was written when Paul was very angry and yet in the Galatians he [Paul] develops the theology of justification by faith. (p. 486)

According to Tutu, Black Theology is concerned with the 'significance of black existence, with liberation, with a meaning of reconciliation, with humanization with forgiveness' (1979:489). Tutu affirmed that Black Theology was about affirming black identity, dignity and worth in a context where racism and injustices sought to dehumanise black people. This was something which African Theology was not focused or interested in.

With regard to this, Tutu highlights to Mbiti, the need to comprehend the contextual and liberative nature of Black Theology in apartheid South Africa. Tutu's perspective underscores the fact that Black Theology in South Africa was not simply a theological import from the West but rather an indigenous expression of Christian faith that resonated with African realities. Tutu (1979:489) further argues that 'Black Theology had an existential urgency which African Theology has so far appeared to lack …' which was the basis for its relevance in dealing with South African struggles. The question of the doctrine of the church and its mission to humanity and relevance to African people is found in the work of Black Theology.

It sought to affirm African identity, cultural heritage and spirituality within a Christian framework. Motlhabi (2008) argues in agreement with Tutu that:

> The message of Black Theology, as already seen, is liberation: 'to sent at liberty the oppressed'. As a liberation theology, therefore, it recognised that blacks needed to be liberated from socio-political bondage, which the church tended to ignore in favour of a pie-in-the-sky […] (p. 23)

This 'pie-in-the-sky' approach encouraged black people to endure oppression with the hope of a better afterlife rather than confronting systemic injustice. Motlhabi then regards Black Theology as a necessary corrective that brought faith into direct engagement with the struggle for justice. This is a view which Motlhabi and many others who laid the foundation of Black Theology in South Africa hold.

Theologians such as Buti Tlhagale, Takatso Mofokeng, Simon Maimela, Bonganjalo Goba, Allan Boesak, Itumeleng Mosala, Mokgethi Motlhabi, Tinyiko Maluleke, Vuyani Vellem and many others were instrumental in the establishment and development of Black Theology of Liberation during a time when black individuals were treated as non-humans. This theology arose in response to the manipulation of scripture by the apartheid regime, which used biblical texts to justify inhumane treatment and racial segregation.

Maimela (1997) highlights how the apartheid regime misappropriated scripture, citing the story of the Tower of Babel (Gn 11:1–8), to argue that it was God's will for different races to be separated. Such interpretations perpetuated a narrative that undermined the dignity of black individuals, framing them as subservient to white authority. This misleading theology created a false dichotomy between human and non-human, relegating black people to a zone of non-being.

In contrast, Black Theology emerged not merely as a theological framework but as a 'theology of life' (Vellem 2015). Vellem's characterisation of Black Theology as a 'theology of life' is significant in relation to the ontological struggles of black people, particularly in contexts of suffering and systemic oppression. Whereas dominant Western theological traditions have often been abstract and detached from lived experience, Black Theology asserts itself as an embodied, existential and liberative theology that engages directly with the realities of black suffering. This aligns with Berryman's (2019:272) discussion of ontology as defining what can be known, where Black Theology insists that the

knowledge of God and faith must be rooted in the concrete realities of black existence, rather than being confined to abstract doctrinal formulations.

In a context where people's lives were undermined by oppressive conditions, Black Theology affirmed that God is on the side of the oppressed (Cone 2008), energising individuals to live meaningfully despite their struggles. By asserting the intrinsic humanity of black individuals, Black Theology enabled them to challenge narratives aimed at destroying their dignity.

Vellem (2015:2) argues that Black Theology of Liberation embodies the energy to hold onto life amid conditions of death. It regards all of life as spiritual, eliminating dichotomies, and provides strength to resist oppression. This perspective, rooted in the lived experiences of suffering and the search for liberation, enabled black people to engage meaningfully with God, recognising their humanity as integral to the divine scheme of creation.

Black Theology of Liberation aligns closely with the Exodus narrative in the Bible, serving as a foundational framework for interpreting struggles against systemic oppression. During this era, Black Theology focused on biblical interpretation from the perspective of the oppressed, establishing itself as a hermeneutic of hope in pursuit of freedom, justice and dignity (Cone 1975; Wilmore & Cone 1979). For readers unfamiliar with Black Theology, the Exodus story offers a powerful symbol of liberation that resonates with the experiences of marginalised communities, particularly in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. This narrative critiques socio-economic injustices such as systemic poverty, land dispossession and economic inequality, reframing them as theological imperatives. By drawing parallels between the liberation of the Israelites and contemporary struggles, Black Theology of Liberation emphasises hope, agency and the pursuit of justice as central to faith-based activism.

In the struggle for liberation, leaders such as Desmond Tutu advocated for a unified approach that combined the religious experiences of black Africans and African Americans to combat the legacies of white supremacy and colonialism (Tutu 1993:385–392). Both Black and African Theologies faced significant resistance and were often marginalised by dominant American and European theological traditions, as well as by those overseeing theological institutions in Africa.

Wilmore and Cone (1988:100) argue that Black Theology of Liberation is not simply a gift from the Christian gospel handed down to enslaved people; rather, it is an adaptation made by black individuals of a gospel imposed upon them by their oppressors. This theology has been cultivated and sustained through various expressions within black churches, addressing the profound and often violent issues of life and death faced by a historically despised community. The black church has not only nurtured individuals but has also helped them endure brutalities that should never have been inflicted upon any group. Black Theology of Liberation reflects the lived experiences of black Christians, offering a redemptive vision for the future (Wilmore & Cone 1988:100).

Anthony Reddie (2020:3–4) acknowledges the perception that Black Theology in South Africa has been viewed as a 'transitory or unconventional discipline' in the post-apartheid era. However, rather than affirming this notion, Reddie – along with Tshaka and Makofane (2010:532–546) – highlights the underlying challenges that have led to such a perception. Tshaka and Makofane argue for the continued significance of Black Theology, emphasising that it remains deeply relevant not merely as a tool for historical liberation but as a framework for addressing persistent socio-political and spiritual issues in contemporary South Africa. Similarly, Mokgethi Motlhabi (2009:162–180) analyses the five phases of Black Theology, demonstrating how its evolution reflects both continuity and adaptation in response to contemporary struggles. Motlhabi's framework highlights the fact that while Black Theology has undergone shifts in emphasis, its core liberative ethos remains crucial for addressing systemic injustices in post-apartheid South Africa.

Three decades after the advent of democracy, South African society continues to grapple with issues such as racial injustice, economic disparity and political disenfranchisement. While the enduring legacy of apartheid remains a significant factor shaping socio-economic conditions and racial relations, it is not the sole contributor to these challenges. Corruption, wasteful expenditure and inadequate service delivery have also played a critical role in perpetuating economic disparities and social injustices. In this complex context, insights from Black Theology of Liberation remain profoundly relevant as a resource for advocacy and reform (Boesak 1977:45). Boesak (1977:45) argues that Black Theology of Liberation does not only confront past injustices but also serves as a prophetic voice against the ways in which power structures continue to marginalise black communities even in a post-apartheid society. He critiques the tendency of political liberation to be mistaken for economic freedom, highlighting how racialised economic disparities persist despite the formal dismantling of apartheid. This reinforces the need for a theological framework that not only remembers the struggles of the past but also actively engages in economic justice and political advocacy today. The enduring legacy of apartheid is not only seen in structural inequalities but also in the psychological and communal effects of generational poverty and exclusion, issues that Black Theology continues to address as part of its mission for holistic liberation.

Moreover, Black Theology of Liberation contrasts significantly with the Western theological tradition that has evolved from Augustine to Barth, both in perspective and content, as well as in stylistic approach (Tshaka & Makofane 2010:536). Black Theology calls for an active faith that resists oppression and works towards a more just and equitable society. Its emphasis on solidarity, human dignity and transformative justice ensures its ongoing significance in confronting contemporary injustices in South Africa.

The ontological perspectives on black identity

Philosophy often grapples with the concept of 'being', which is central to ontology – the study of existence (More 2012:23). Smith (2003:155) describes ontology as a branch of philosophy that examines 'the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes, and relations in every area of reality'. He notes that the term can also refer to a broader study of what might exist, known as 'metaphysics' (Smith 2003:155). Ontology seeks to understand the nature of existence and the structure of reality (Crotty 2003:10).

The discussion of the ontology of being and Black Theology in the context of black suffering is deeply intertwined, as both grapple with the question of what it means to be human in a world structured by anti-blackness and systemic oppression. Black Theology, emerging as a radical response to these ontological distortions, asserts the full humanity of black people through the lens of faith and liberation. It reclaims black being by affirming that God is on the side of the oppressed and that salvation is not just a spiritual promise but a material and existential reality that must confront suffering and injustice. In the South African context, where apartheid and its aftermath continue to shape black suffering, Black Theology serves as an ontological and theological affirmation that black life matters, resisting the erasure of black existence through political, economic and theological means. By engaging both ontology and theology, Black Theology offers a framework that not only critiques systemic dehumanisation but also envisions a future where being black is fully recognised, affirmed and liberated.

Berryman (2019:272) defines ontology as the philosophical study of being, asserting that it describes what can be known. He illustrates this with a practical example: in the context of cooking, two possible ontologies exist – vegetarian and omnivore. A vegetarian believes that animals should not be consumed as food, while an omnivore holds an opposing view. These fundamental differences lead to very different culinary creations. Firstly, Berryman's definition becomes crucial, as it highlights how knowledge about being is constructed within particular social, historical and theological frameworks. If ontology determines what can be known about existence, then the racialised history of blackness has often positioned black people outside of dominant ontological categories of full humanity. Secondly, his example illustrates the fact that ontology addresses what one believes can exist and what is considered fundamental. This analogy is useful in understanding how ontology shapes not only abstract philosophical thought but also lived realities, including the experience of black suffering and Black Theology. Just as different ontologies in cooking result in distinct practices and worldviews, competing ontological frameworks influence how black existence is understood and treated within society.

The ontological exploration of black identity transcends conventional notions of identity, intertwining historical resilience, cultural richness and a profound sense of self that challenges societal perceptions of existence (Gordon 2000:98; More 2012:23). Engaging with the ontology of black being involves confronting a unique existential journey marked by deep-rooted heritage and a relentless pursuit of justice and self-affirmation. This perspective resists simplistic interpretations, revealing a dynamic interplay of memory, resistance and dignity that reshapes our understanding of human experience (Ramose 2002:35). Central to this discourse is the notion that black identity is not static but continuously evolving through struggle and triumph (Biko 1978:109).

The existential experience of being black encompasses both the weight of historical injustices and the vibrancy of cultural expression. Through this lens, the black experience offers profound insights into the nature of human existence and societal structures (Gordon 2000:76). The philosophical examination of black ontology serves as a powerful critique of dominant narratives and a call for a more nuanced understanding of identity (Ramose 2002:45). Black intellectuals have actively challenged the misrepresentation of their identity, striving to reclaim their self-worth from the depths of racial prejudice (Buthelezi 1975:19). Mpunzi (1974) presents a counter-hegemonic perspective, stating:

> God recognises and affirms my individuality, including my Blackness. Regardless of your circumstances or others' perceptions, you [*as a Black person*] must assert your humanity. Embrace the very aspect of yourself that others demean. Love your Black body – your Blackness. (p. 137)

In this context, black ministers advocate that both God and Scripture affirm the personhood and dignity of African people. Tutu (1975:73) famously declared, 'We [*as Africans*] matter, we are alive and kicking, and Black "is" beautiful'. This ontological perspective resonates deeply within the Black Theology of Liberation. Figures such as James Cone (2008) have articulated this theological framework, interpreting the Christian faith through the lived experiences of black people (Cone 2008). Black Theology of Liberation emphasises that God aligns with the struggle for justice and liberation, asserting that the divine presence is actively engaged in the fight against systemic oppression and inequality. This framework affirms the inherent dignity and worth of black individuals, highlighting a theology that is both spiritually and socially transformative.

Chabani Manganyi (2019), a prominent theorist of Black Consciousness, provides critical insight into the ontological dimensions of black identity from a psychological perspective. Manganyi (2019:20–31) argues that Black Consciousness involves a profound awareness of self in relation to systemic and historical forces that shape identity. He posits that this consciousness represents both a personal and collective realisation, where black identity is understood through the lens of social and political struggle. Manganyi emphasises

that to be black is to navigate and resist a world that often seeks to marginalise and devalue black existence, thereby forging a path of self-definition and empowerment.

Allan Boesak, a significant voice in liberation theology, further articulates that the struggle for liberation is not merely an opposition to oppression but a quest for a transformative vision of humanity. This quest aligns with the theological assertion that the divine is actively involved in the pursuit of justice and equality. By integrating Manganyi's insights with theological perspectives, we gain a richer understanding of how existential and theological concerns converge. This integrated view highlights the profound relationship between the quest for justice and the redefinition of human dignity, advocating for a more equitable and just world through both philosophical and theological lenses.

In this context, Buffel (2021:2–8) underscores the necessity of aligning Black Theology with contemporary challenges, asserting that its relevance today lies in its ability to address not only the remnants of past injustices but also to actively engage with current socio-political realities and ongoing struggles for dignity and justice. Buffel (2021) highlights Maluleke's observation that Black Theology must evolve beyond its historical origins to tackle current systemic issues and support a comprehensive vision of justice and human dignity. This dynamic approach ensures that Black Theology remains a potent force for both personal and societal transformation in the modern era.

Reclaiming the gospel: Black Theology as a response to historical oppression

This statement 'Reclaiming the gospel: Black Theology as a response to historical oppression' may appear as a heading, but it raises a critical question: Can the gospel be truly reclaimed without a fundamental commitment to justice? At the core of this inquiry is the recognition that the gospel has historically been manipulated to justify oppression, particularly in the South African context where colonialism and apartheid were often supported by distorted theological interpretations. Black Theology challenges these distortions by insisting that reclaiming the gospel must involve a radical commitment to justice, as Jesus himself identified with the oppressed and preached liberation. If the gospel is merely reclaimed in a doctrinal or rhetorical sense, without actively confronting systemic injustices such as economic inequality, land dispossession and racial discrimination, then it remains incomplete and risks becoming complicit in ongoing oppression. For the gospel to be reclaimed, Black Theology cannot merely be an intellectual exercise; it must be lived out in action and reflect the Christian gospel to the people.

Black Theology represents a profound reclamation of the Christian gospel, not merely as a gift bestowed upon slaves by their oppressors, but as a dynamic and transformative appropriation by the enslaved themselves (Cone 1970:13). This theological framework has emerged from the crucible of oppression, providing a powerful response to the dehumanising forces of historical subjugation (Wilmore & Cone 1979:22). Deeply rooted in the lived experiences of black Christians, the Black Theology of Liberation has been nurtured and sustained through the vibrant life of black churches and their diverse expressions (Boesak 1977:45). This theology confronts the violent realities of existence, addressing the dehumanising conditions inflicted upon black communities throughout history (Gordon 2000:76). Rather than being a mere academic construct, Black Theology is a living testament to the resilience and survival of black people in the face of systemic brutality (Cone 1975:19). It is the fruit of reflection upon the black Christian experience, emerging from a legacy of pain and struggle while remaining a potent force in the present and a hopeful vision for the future, as articulated by Wilmore and Cone (1988:100).

The phenomenology of Black Theology of Liberation, grounded in the unique experiences and cultural expressions of black people, arose from the urgent need of a fragmented community to affirm its place within the Kingdom of God. This phenomenology directly challenges misleading theologies, such as the 'curse of Ham' doctrine and the apartheid-era theology of separate development, which sustained and legitimised the South African apartheid system by falsely negating the humanity of black individuals. The 'curse of Ham' doctrine was a theological misinterpretation used to justify racial hierarchies by suggesting that black people were divinely destined to serve others. Apartheid theology, including the idea of 'separate development', claimed biblical support for racial segregation, asserting that it was part of God's divine plan for humanity. Hutchinson (1985) examines the use of scripture in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa to justify apartheid, particularly the interpretation of the 'curse of Ham'. Loubser (1996) critiques the apartheid theology as a contextual theology gone wrong, identifying its foundations in biblical misinterpretations like the curse of Ham.

Black Theology, deeply embedded in hymns, liberation songs and the sermons of black preachers, represents the most promising hope for the survival and empowerment of a people long in search of justice and redemption. As Desmond Tutu (1999) notably remarked, 'The liberation of a people is a spiritual and moral imperative, as well as a political necessity. True freedom is achieved through justice and reconciliation'. In this light, Black Theology not only addresses immediate political struggles but also frames these within a broader spiritual and moral context, emphasising that genuine liberation involves both the pursuit of justice and the process of reconciliation.

This pursuit can be understood through the concept of 'religious schizophrenia'. Historically, mainstream Christian theology often supported or justified oppressive systems like apartheid and slavery, creating a profound disjunction between the preached gospel and the lived

reality of black individuals (Boesak 1984:68; Cone 1975:47). This 'schizophrenia' reflects the contradiction inherent in a theology that professes universal salvation while perpetuating systems of oppression. Black Theology emerged as a response to this theological fragmentation, seeking to resolve the inconsistencies of traditional Christian teachings by aligning faith with the experiences and struggles of black communities (Cone 1970:13; Wilmore & Cone 1979:112). By challenging and reinterpreting oppressive theological narratives, Black Theology aims to offer a coherent and empowering vision of faith that aligns with justice, equality and human dignity (Tutu 1999:121).

This perspective aligns closely with the insights of Frantz Fanon, who explored the profound impacts of colonial oppression and the necessity for radical change. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) provides a critical framework for understanding the psychological and structural dimensions of oppression. In this seminal work, Fanon examines the violent nature of colonial rule and argues that true liberation requires not only the dismantling of colonial political structures but also a psychological and economic revolution that restores the dignity of the oppressed. He asserts that decolonisation is inherently a process of reclaiming agency and resisting the internalised inferiority imposed by colonial systems (Fanon 1963:35).

Fanon's analysis is deeply relevant to Black Theology Liberation's engagement with socio-economic justice. Just as Fanon critiques the illusion of political independence without economic and social restructuring, Black Theology of Liberation argues that the formal end of apartheid did not equate to true liberation for black South Africans. Economic inequalities, systemic poverty and land dispossession persist as legacies of colonial and apartheid rule, demonstrating that structural oppression cannot be overcome without a fundamental reordering of socio-economic relations. Moreover, Fanon's notion of violence as a means of reclaiming humanity – while controversial – resonates with Black Theology of Liberation's radical call for justice. While Black Theology of Liberation does not advocate physical violence, it does embrace what Cone (1998) calls 'prophetic confrontation' – a theological imperative to disrupt oppressive structures and demand socio-economic transformation. Fanon's work, therefore, offers a powerful lens through which to interpret Black Theology of Liberation's continued relevance in advocating not just for spiritual liberation, but for tangible economic and political emancipation. By integrating Fanon's insights, Black Theology of Liberation strengthens its critique of economic injustices and reinforces its call for an active, transformative faith that does not settle for superficial reconciliation, but instead pursues systemic change.

Thus, Fanon's revolutionary ideas and Tutu's call for justice and reconciliation collectively underscore the comprehensive nature of Black Theology's response to historical oppression (Fanon 1963:35; Tutu 1999:89). This approach integrates spiritual, moral and socio-political dimensions, highlighting Black Theology's commitment to achieving holistic liberation and empowerment in the face of enduring injustice (Boesak 1984:72; Cone 1970:15).

Theology of defiance: Exploring the pillars of black liberation

Black Theology of Liberation emerged as a direct response to the systemic injustices faced by African Americans and black South Africans, particularly during the civil rights and anti-apartheid struggles (Cone 1998:45). Traditionally, this theology has centred on the rejection of theological frameworks that justified racial oppression, instead of emphasising the liberative power of faith in dismantling systemic injustice. However, while Black Theology remains a radical force for justice, it must now confront new challenges that extend beyond historical racial oppression. While previous black theologians focused on dismantling legal apartheid, today's struggle is increasingly economic and political, requiring a shift in theological discourse. My argument in this section is that the theological pillars of Black Liberation must be recontextualised to address contemporary socio-political crises that disproportionately affect black communities in South Africa today. These include not only racial disparities but also issues related to economic class, government accountability and intra-community struggles that require renewed theological critique.

Economic disparity and the failure of political liberation to translate into economic justice

While apartheid officially ended in 1994, economic injustice persists in South Africa, with black communities still facing high unemployment, unequal access to resources and systemic poverty (Boesak 2017:67). Black Theology must shift its focus towards economic liberation, advocating for redistributive justice, land reform and economic restructuring. Boesak (2017) critiques the illusion of 'political liberation' as an incomplete victory when economic structures remain largely unchanged. He warns against the danger of a new black elite that has access to political power but does not necessarily advocate for the economic liberation of the masses. The challenge today is no longer only legal racial discrimination but also entrenched economic systems that maintain inequality, requiring a theological response that emphasises economic empowerment and sustainability. This means rethinking theological advocacy in economic terms, aligning with movements that seek to transform ownership, land distribution and financial inclusion for black communities.

Class stratification within black communities

Unlike during apartheid, where oppression was clearly delineated along racial lines, contemporary struggles involve the rise of a black elite that often aligns with neoliberal policies that disadvantage the working class and the poor (Maluleke 2010:27). A renewed Black Theology must critique

internalised oppression and the economic divide within black communities, pushing for greater solidarity among the marginalised. Motlhabi (2009) argues that Black Theology's effectiveness diminishes when it fails to address intra-black class tensions, which often lead to new forms of exclusion and economic gatekeeping. If Black Theology remains solely focused on past struggles without addressing class divisions today, it risks becoming irrelevant to the working class and unemployed youth who face ongoing economic hardships. Thus, contemporary Black Theology must evolve beyond race-based liberation to include class-based liberation, recognising that some black elites now benefit from systems of exclusion.

The role of the Church in addressing corruption and political complicity

With the post-apartheid government facing allegations of corruption and mismanagement, the church, informed by Black Theology, must reclaim its prophetic voice. This means not only critiquing external structures of oppression but also challenging state actors and institutions that fail to uphold economic justice. While Black Theology has historically confronted colonial and apartheid structures, its prophetic role today must extend to critiquing the failures of black leadership, particularly where economic exploitation persists under new political regimes (Tshaka & Makofane 2010:543). Theological voices must hold power accountable, not just in corporate or white-dominated spaces but also within black-led governments and institutions. This includes an interrogation of how faith institutions engage (or fail to engage) with economic injustices and corruption in contemporary South Africa.

By re-examining these theological pillars through a contemporary lens, Black Theology remains an urgent and evolving discipline. Unlike some earlier theological perspectives that saw Black Theology as primarily a response to colonial oppression, contemporary scholars argue that it must now grapple with the broader economic and political landscape in which race and class intersect (Maluleke 2010; Reddie 2020). While previous black theologians focused on dismantling racial apartheid, today's struggle requires a broader interrogation of economic power structures, political accountability and intra-black class dynamics. This evolution ensures that Black Theology remains not just a historical discourse but a living, adaptive movement committed to justice in all its forms.

Redefining hope in the midst of despair

Within the framework of Black Theology of Liberation, 'Redefining Hope in the Midst of Despair' examines the intersection of faith and socio-economic justice in contemporary South Africa. The concept of 'hope' in this theological tradition does not refer to a passive expectation but rather to a radical, transformative force rooted in both spiritual conviction and socio-political activism. This understanding is grounded in the works of black theologians such as Vellem (2015), Cone (1998) and Boesak (2017), who emphasise that hope must be action-oriented, addressing not only spiritual concerns but also material injustices.

Vellem (2014), in his article 'Black Theology of Liberation: A Theology of Life in the Context of the Empire', argues that hope in Black Theology of Liberation is inextricably linked to what he calls the 'Economy of Life'. This framework critiques neoliberal capitalism and its exploitative structures, calling instead for a socio-economic model that prioritises human dignity and communal well-being over profit-driven economies.

This framework differs from other socio-economic justice models in that it centres theological discourse within the lived experiences of black communities, particularly in the Global South. While some liberation theologies emphasise class struggle from a Marxist perspective, Black Theology's Economy of Life integrates both spiritual and material dimensions, affirming that economic liberation is not separate from theological reflection but an essential component of faith-based activism.

Vellem (2014) further critiques the ways in which dominant economic systems continue to exclude marginalised groups, arguing that 'hope' in Black Theology of Liberation must be understood as a radical praxis that not only resists injustice but actively builds alternative socio-economic structures. Following this approach, my contribution in this section is to extend Vellem's insights by applying them specifically to contemporary post-apartheid struggles, where economic inequality persists despite political freedom. While Vellem's focus is largely on global economic imperialism, I argue that South Africa's economic disparities require an expanded theological critique that includes issues such as corporate corruption, land redistribution and the commodification of labour.

Vellem (2015), in his work Tumelo Le Moruo, articulates how economic structures are deeply theological issues, arguing that economic exclusion is a moral and spiritual crisis. He contends that faith must resist exploitative economic practices by advocating for just economic policies and alternative systems of wealth distribution (Vellem 2015:4). His critique of capitalist imperialism aligns with the Black Theology tradition of rejecting economic structures that sustain racial and class-based inequalities. This economic theology is not abstract but engages with tangible realities such as land dispossession, unemployment and corporate exploitation, which continue to impact black South Africans disproportionately.

Motlhabi (2008), in the final two chapters of *African/Black Theology: Looking Back, Moving On*, expands on this by examining the socio-economic responsibility of Black Theology in the post-apartheid era. He highlights the fact

that while apartheid-era oppression was explicit, today's economic injustices operate in more subtle but equally oppressive ways (Motlhabi 2008:189). He argues that theology must directly engage with economic inequality, particularly through advocacy for land redistribution, labour rights and social welfare programmes that uplift marginalised communities. By integrating Motlhabi's insights, my contribution in this section is to emphasise that Black Theology of Liberation must not only critique economic injustice but actively propose faith-driven economic alternatives that challenge neoliberal economic policies.

Unlike traditional frameworks that focus solely on political liberation, the *Economy of Life* engages with systemic economic injustices such as land dispossession, structural unemployment and corporate exploitation, positioning Black Theology as a counter-hegemonic force against global imperialism (Vellem 2014:2). While some economic justice frameworks focus solely on redistribution, Black Theology integrates faith and justice, asserting that economic transformation is both a theological and a moral imperative.

By incorporating Vellem's and Motlhabi's perspectives, this section narrows its focus to address how Black Theology critiques and reshapes economic justice discourse, advocating for policies that centre dignity, justice and sustainability for black South Africans. This ensures that the discussion is not only grounded in theological reflection but also deeply relevant to contemporary socio-economic struggles.

Hope, therefore, is not an abstract theological construct but a concrete commitment to justice, ensuring that theological discourse remains actively engaged in dismantling economic and racial inequalities.

The intersection of faith and justice

The interplay between faith and justice is a crucial theme in various theological frameworks, particularly within Black Theology of Liberation. This theology offers profound insights into how religious faith can address socio-economic injustices and promote liberation, asserting that justice is intrinsically linked to liberation from systemic oppression and economic exploitation. James Cone argues that justice must confront the injustices faced by marginalised groups and actively work towards their liberation. He emphasises that 'the cross and the lynching tree are metaphors of justice, where God's solidarity with the oppressed demands a revolutionary response to injustice' (Cone 1990:23). This perspective underscores the fact that justice involves not only spiritual redemption, but also socio-political action aimed at dismantling oppressive structures.

Similarly, Katie Geneva Cannon (1988) elaborates on the concept of justice within Black Theology, advocating for a faith that directly engages with social inequalities. She argues that 'justice in Black Theology means aligning oneself with the marginalised and advocating for systemic change, reflecting God's inclusive love and commitment to human dignity' (Cannon 1988:45). This view highlights the fact that Black Theology sees justice as a practical outworking of faith, intertwined with the struggle for socio-economic equity and liberation. Black Theology sees justice not just as a moral concept but as a divine mandate, one that calls for active participation in dismantling oppression. It is about standing with the marginalised, not as an act of charity, but as a reflection of God's love and commitment to the full dignity of all people.

Incorporating insights from Frantz Fanon adds further depth to this discussion. Fanon's analysis of colonialism and its dehumanising effects provides a critical lens through which to understand the struggles faced by marginalised communities. He argues that the psychological and existential impacts of colonial oppression necessitate a radical reformation of societal structures, stating that 'the colonised must reclaim their humanity through a revolutionary struggle against the oppressive structures imposed upon them' (Fanon 1963:35). This notion complements the emphasis in Black Theology of Liberation on systemic change and liberation from oppression. Fanon's work underscores the fact that the pursuit of justice involves not only addressing economic and political inequalities but also confronting the deep-seated psychological effects of oppression.

In addition to these foundational insights, Black Theology of Liberation emphasises the necessity of community solidarity and collective action. This approach advocates that true justice emerges from the empowerment and active participation of disenfranchised communities in shaping their own destinies. It recognises that systemic change requires not only theological reflection but also grassroots mobilisation and sustained activism (Cone 1990:45).

The practical application of Black Theology's principles of justice often involves creating and supporting institutions that serve marginalised populations, such as educational programmes, economic cooperatives and advocacy groups. In South Africa, these principles have been implemented through various faith-based initiatives aimed at addressing socio-economic injustices, including:

- *The South African Council of Churches (SACC):* Historically a strong advocate for justice, particularly during apartheid, the SACC continues to champion economic and social justice today. Through its 'The South Africa We Pray For' campaign, it addresses issues such as poverty, corruption and inequality by engaging policymakers and grassroots communities.
- *The Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM):* Founded by Father Michael Lapsley, a liberation theologian and anti-apartheid activist, IHOM focuses on healing trauma experienced by marginalised communities because of apartheid, poverty and violence. The institute runs restorative justice workshops aimed at reconciliation and social transformation.

- *The Kairos Document and Ongoing Advocacy:* The Kairos Document (1985) was a faith-based critique of apartheid that laid the foundation for ongoing theological activism. Today, groups like Kairos Southern Africa engage in social advocacy against corruption, land injustices and economic inequality, calling for policy reforms rooted in ethical leadership.
- *The Church Land Programme (CLP):* Based in Pietermaritzburg, this initiative supports landless communities by advocating for land redistribution and agrarian reform. The CLP helps black South Africans gain access to land ownership, resisting economic exclusion.

These institutions are viewed as vital tools in the fight against socio-economic injustices, embodying the theology's commitment to tangible, life-affirming change (Cannon 1988:52). The Black Theology of Liberation proposes faith-based strategies that include direct engagement with socio-political issues, such as advocating for civil rights and economic reforms, stressing that faith communities must actively participate in efforts to rectify injustices and promote systemic change.

According to Motlhabi (1998:58), 'faith communities should engage in socio-political activism that addresses the root causes of economic disparity and political oppression, utilising theological insights to guide their efforts'. This strategy underscores the importance of integrating faith with practical action in the pursuit of justice. Models of faith-based intervention within Black Theology provide concrete examples of how faith can drive social change. The emphasis on liberation has inspired numerous initiatives, including community organising and advocacy for policy changes aimed at addressing racial and economic injustices.

In South Africa today, faith-based activism continues to shape socio-economic and political landscapes. Several contemporary examples include:

- *The South African Council of Churches (SACC):* The SACC remains active in advocating for economic justice and anti-corruption measures. In 2021, it called for urgent land reform policies to address historical dispossession and poverty. The SACC has also been vocal about government accountability, particularly regarding corruption in state-owned enterprises.
- *The Archbishop Thabo Makgoba Development Trust:* Led by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, this initiative focuses on poverty alleviation, education and ethical leadership. The Trust works with grassroots communities to promote economic sustainability and social justice.
- *The Denis Hurley Centre (DHC) in Durban:* A faith-based organisation that provides healthcare, shelter and job training for marginalised groups, including refugees and the homeless. It embodies Black Theology's commitment to social action by engaging in humanitarian efforts and policy advocacy.

Historically, the black Church has played a pivotal role in civil rights movements and continues to influence contemporary social justice efforts (Cone 1990). Today, faith-based interventions continue to challenge oppressive systems. Faith leaders and activists have mobilised mass protests against gender-based violence (GBV) and state corruption, with churches participating in anti-GBV marches and public advocacy campaigns. Policy reforms were advocated by partnering with organisations like SECTION27 and the Jesuit Institute South Africa to push for improvements in healthcare, education and social welfare policies. Established community support networks, including food distribution programmes were led by churches in response to poverty and unemployment exacerbated by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

These contemporary efforts demonstrate how faith remains a powerful catalyst for societal transformation, affirming the Black Theology of Liberation's call for systemic change (Cannon 1988:63).

The intersection of faith and justice within Black Theology of Liberation highlights a commitment to addressing socio-economic challenges through faith-driven action. This theological framework emphasises that justice involves a transformative engagement with societal structures, advocating for the liberation of marginalised communities and reflecting a deep alignment between theological principles and socio-political activism. The integration of Frantz Fanon's insights enriches this framework by emphasising the need for a comprehensive approach to justice that includes psychological and existential dimensions, ensuring a more holistic and effective pursuit of liberation and equity.

Theological perspectives in South Africa cannot be divorced from the socio-political realities shaping the lives of its people. Theology must engage critically with the political and economic systems that perpetuate injustice, advocating for a transformative vision of justice and equality (Villa-Vicencio 1992:126). This viewpoint underscores the necessity for theology to act as a catalyst for social change rather than remaining a passive observer of societal injustices. Villa-Vicencio (1992) argues for a theology of reconstruction, which emphasises rebuilding post-apartheid South African society by fostering reconciliation and democratic participation. He views Black Theology as a temporary resistance movement that should transition towards reconstructing a new society based on democratic values and human rights. However, this approach has been met with significant critique from black theologians who argue that reconstruction must not come at the expense of radical prophetic engagement with systemic injustices (Maluleke 1994:14).

Maluleke (1994), in his article 'A Proposal for a Theology of Reconstruction: A Critical Approach', critiques Villa-Vicencio's reconstructionist theology, arguing that it risks depoliticising liberation theology by prioritising

reconciliation over the structural dismantling of racial and economic injustices. He contends that Villa-Vicencio's framework assumes that post-apartheid South Africa had entered a new political era that no longer required the same radical approach as Black Theology. However, Maluleke asserts that the economic and social inequalities left by apartheid continue to necessitate a prophetic theology that does not prematurely shift towards reconstruction without first addressing ongoing oppression (Maluleke 1994:17).

Similarly, Vellem (2012) critiques Villa-Vicencio's project of reconstruction in his article 'Ideology and Spirituality: A Critique of Villa-Vicencio's Project of Reconstruction'. He argues that Villa-Vicencio's emphasis on reconstruction does not sufficiently engage with the economic and ideological systems that continue to marginalise black communities. Vellem asserts that Black Theology must maintain its ideological resistance against structural injustices rather than risk assimilation into a post-apartheid framework that assumes a level playing field (Vellem 2012:22).

Thus, while Villa-Vicencio's work on reconstruction provides valuable insights into the theological responses to post-apartheid South Africa, it remains at odds with the Black Theology of Liberation, which prioritises continued resistance against economic and social oppression. By engaging these debates, this section acknowledges the complexity of theological discourse in post-apartheid South Africa while affirming the need for an ongoing prophetic critique of power structures that sustain economic injustice and racial disparities.

Conclusion

This article contributes to Black Theology of Liberation by shifting the focus from its historical role in resisting racial apartheid to its urgent relevance in addressing contemporary economic injustices. While Black Theology has traditionally centred on racial oppression, this article has argued that today's struggles require an evolved theological framework that also interrogates intra-black economic divides, corporate exploitation and the structural failures of post-apartheid economic policies.

This study extends Black Theology discourse by emphasising that liberation theology must evolve beyond past struggles to actively resist economic apartheid, challenge neoliberal capitalism and critique political systems that fail to deliver economic justice. It calls for a renewed prophetic voice within the black Church, one that is not only engaged in racial advocacy but is also committed to economic transformation, land justice and poverty alleviation.

By incorporating insights from Boesak, Vellem, Maluleke and Motlhabi, this article repositions Black Theology as a dynamic and evolving discourse, one that must remain deeply engaged with the contemporary realities of economic oppression and structural inequality in South Africa. Future research should further explore how faith-based movements and religious institutions can actively resist economic injustice and develop alternative economic models rooted in liberationist theology.

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