Verbum et Ecclesia
ISSN: (Online) 2074-7705, (Print) 1609-9982

A colonial-decolonial critique of theological and religious research in South Africa (1975–2025)

Author:
Martin Mujinga[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Martin Mujinga,
martinmujinga@gmail.com

Dates:
Received: 06 Oct. 2024
Accepted: 04 Feb. 2025
Published: 25 June 2025

How to cite this article:
Mujinga, M., 2025, 'A colonial-decolonial critique of theological and religious research in South Africa (1975–2025)', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(3), a3346. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i3.3346

As the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) celebrates 50 years of theological and religious research, reflecting on how the two have shaped South Africa's history is essential. Religion and theology had been used as weapons of oppression and liberation. Before 1994, the two stood on two conflicting sides – the oppressor and the oppressed. The elite identified with the minority, while the majority of the poor craved an incarnate black God, who sides with the marginalised. The engagement of God in the Kairos Document, Black Theology and the decoloniality of theology in the post-apartheid era redefined God as one who is not static. Using a qualitative research methodology, this article aimed to explore the contours of the theological discourse employed by the RITR during the colonial and post-colonial eras. The article argued that the trajectory of theology from 1975 to 2025 demonstrates that God's revelation takes different forms of the Godself. The need to redefine and redescribe a God who cannot be captured but remains incognito has been the major thrust of RITR; as such, celebrating the golden jubilee is a just cause. The article concluded by proposing future trajectories of theology in South Africa.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The trajectories of theology from the minority to the majority, from confrontational and defensive to decolonial theology in South Africa, demonstrate that religion and theology are not static, but rather the people's socio-political and economic life continues to define and redefine the relationship between God and humanity.

Keywords: 50 years; religion; Black Consciousness; Black Theology; decoloniality; 1975–2025.

Introduction

The year 2025 marks 50 years of the existence of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) which was established in 1975. The institute was founded at a time when South Africa was under the apartheid government. This political administration had a bearing on the socioeconomic, political and religious life of the rulers and the ruled (Kairos Theologians 1985; Maimela 1989:6; Nolan 1987:17; Pieterse 2001:26). The totalitarian governance of South Africa had its replica in the church resulting in the compartmentalisation of God to speak on either the side of the powerful or the oppressed. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was interpreted based on the socioeconomic position of pigmentation. Whereas the poor in spirit in Matthew 5:3 represented the message of the powerful minority, the poor in Luke 6:20 represented the majority of black South Africa (Parratt 1990:527). The RITR was inaugurated at the heightened theological disparity in South Africa to address the issues of the abuse of religion and theology for the advantage of the minority and the disadvantage of the majority.

To deal with the religious and theological issues of the time and the future of the same, the RITR held annual conferences, managed national and international projects, and published a vast number of academic books and articles (University of South Africa [UNISA] 2024). These academic spaces were meant to address the need to read theology as a source of justice and not as a footing of oppression. It is important to note that, the use of religion and theology by the poor majority as a tool of liberation and the misuse and abuse of the same by the minority rich as a weapon of oppression created a rift between the two people resulting in the battlefield

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Fifty years of theological and religion research: The history of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (1975–2025),' under the expert guidance of guest editor Professor Emeritus Christina Landman.

of the God talk between the weak and the powerful. The article argues that, as the RITR celebrates its golden jubilee, the tone used in religion and theology in South Africa transcended from defensive and confrontational to negotiative as most theologians turned their swords into ploughshares. Instead of confrontational and defensive theology, some South African theologians, both the former colonisers and the colonised, are concentrating on the need to decolonise theology (cf. Baloyi 2024; Naidoo 2024; Pali 2024; Sakupapa 2019, 2023; Savides 2022; Tonelli 2020; Ward 2017; West 2021).

Using qualitative research methodology, this article aims to navigate the history of religion and theology in South Africa from 1975 to 2025. The analysis of the role of religion and theology is meant to explore how the two were used to empower the minority and disempower the majority.

The article employed qualitative research methodology to analyse the trajectories of the existing literature on religion and theology in South Africa from 1975 to 2025.

This desk research starts by identifying RITR as an institute, its aim and its objectives. This is followed by its justification to have the 50th anniversary. In traversing the contours taken by religion and theology in South Africa between 1975 and 2025, more emphasis will be given to how the two moved from the privileged few to being an emancipating tool for ordinary people and how both the former colonisers and the colonised are engaging in the negative discourse of decoloniality. The article concludes by proposing the new trends of theological discourse whose ideas are to be made public through the RITR.

The historical background of the Research Institute of Theology and Religion

Research Institute of Theology and Religion was established in 1975 as an Institute for Theological Research (ITR) at the UNISA. The idea was mooted under the leadership of Professor Willem Vorster (UNISA 2024). In 1997, the name ITR was changed to the Research Institute for Theology and Religion after Professor Cornel du Toit took over as Head (UNISA 2003). More changes came after 2019 when the RITR underwent a review and drafted a new constitution, vision, mission and operational plan. The institute is aligned with the School of Humanities and the College of Human Sciences (UNISA 2003).

During the past 50 years, the institute (ITR or RITR) has presented itself in the academic domain through conferences, national and international projects, and the publication of a vast number of academic books and articles (UNISA 2024). The institute also housed the CB Powell Bible Centre which focuses on the popularisation of theology. The founding of the CB Powell Bible Centre in 1984 in the Faculty of Theology at Unisa was made possible through a bequest from the estate of Charles Bergh Powell, whose ideals were that 'the results of theological, and in particular, biblical research, should be made available to Christians with normal theological training' (Mugambi 1996:249). For Mugambi, the goal of the CB Powell Bible Centre is to make available to the public in a simple, understandable and biblically based way, the results of recent theological research (Mugambi 1996:249). Such is the honour of RITR to be a centre of theological empowerment through CB Powell Bible Centre.

Since its establishment in 1975, RITR has developed and managed theological and religious research and its interface with society. Special effort goes into research related to the African context. The RITR launched the South African Science and Religion Forum (SASRF) in 1993 which convenes annually and publishes its proceedings (UNISA 2003). According to the Unisa website, the establishment of SASRF under RITR is the only significant initiative of its kind in South Africa, and this gives RITR a prestigious position of engaging science and religion. Through its Forum for Religious Dialogue (FRD), the RITR regularly presents research seminars on contextual issues.

Vision, mission, core business and the plan of the Research Institute of Theology and Religion

The vision of the RITR is to become an African institute for research excellence in theology and religion. This is done by (UNISA 2023):

> [*D*]oing cutting-edge research of international standard, doing research that impacts the South African and African context, maintaining a high level of academic output, involving national and international scholars in its research, making research available to society at large, being involved in community engagement and promoting a research culture at the University of South Africa. (n.p.)

Moreover, RITR strives to excel in research, community engagement and academic citizenship towards improving the lives of individuals and communities (UNISA 2023).

Guided by the mission of the School of Social Sciences, the College of Human Sciences and Unisa, the mission of the RITR is to serve as a comprehensive transdisciplinary research institute that produces excellent scholarship and research, and fosters active community engagement concerning theology and religion. The RITR is guided by the principles of humanity, equity, community-centredness, innovation and creativity (UNISA 2023).

Moreover, the core business of the institute is to be the leader in the field of specialisation utilising (UNISA 2023):

> [*E*]stablishment of a cooperative culture of free exchange of research information, conducting research in religion and theology that is socially relevant and internationally recognised,

> participating in interdisciplinary research on an international level, contributing through activities to more tolerance and inclusivity in a pluralistic society, soliciting funding to launch new projects and to empower researchers, drawing scholars globally as partners, involving scholars from all races in contextual research, being involved in community service through disseminating the results of theological research to a variety of communities, making it possible for religions to make themselves known in a country with religious pluralism and training and guiding masters' and doctoral students to successful completion of their studies. (n.p.)

The RITR's operational plan for 2020 to 2022 committed the institute to high research output, national and international recognition of its research programmes, and local and continent relevance and impact on communities. In 2021, the RITR published 31 articles and 23 book chapters, demonstrating its productivity (UNISA 2023). Notwithstanding these achievements, the institute recognises the need for continuous improvement, specifically in human resources, postgraduate supervision and sourcing of external grants. The operational plan supports ongoing improvement and is articulated around five strategic focus areas, namely: tuition, research and innovation, community engagement, collaboration and academic management, and resource management (UNISA 2023b). The operational plan of RITR takes cognisance of the transformation agenda in higher education and the community it serves, as well as Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, the National Development Plan and the socio-political environment, including theological and religious aspects.

Justification of Research Institute of Theology and Religion's 50th anniversary celebrations

Celebrations culminate from many achievements of life, and the commemoration of special events. It allows people to reminisce about their past experiences, reflect on what made them where they are and reflect on how these events have shaped them. For Köstlin (2015:11), 'a celebration is remembering the past (but without letting it rule us) but can be an important part of understanding who we are'. As the RITR commemorates its 50th anniversary, several issues must be remembered which made its existence possible. These include the trajectories of the use of religion and theology by the powerful and the weak, respectively. Religion and theology have been used as both weapons of oppression and tools of liberation of the black population in South Africa. The two stood on two conflicting sides, the oppressor on one side and the oppressed on the other side. The minority elite viewed God as one who identifies with the spiritually poor and not the socially poor. Over the years, RITR engaged in these discourses of a powerful God for the rich and a liberating God for the poor. This theology dominated the colonial era. The poor continued to question their suffering. Parratt (1990) mentions that:

> Steve Biko argues that the Black Consciousness Movement was a necessary corrective to the exploitative ascendancy of Whites and their efforts to maintain that dominance by the myth of inferiority of the Black race. (p.527)

Walshe (1987:299) adds that the Dutch Reformed Church legitimatised the policies of apartheid and articulated it as a civil religion. The RITR celebrates the achievements that it made in engaging in these discourses from 1975 to 2025.

Anniversaries are an important part of life because they remind people of important events, both personal and cultural (The Awareness Centre n.d.). Moreover, anniversaries provide an opportunity to reflect on a relationship that once existed. Celebrations do not only remember the preexisting relationship, but they also serve as hooks for ideas, as apologies for reflection and as catalysts for creativity (Köstlin 2015:11). Writing on his LinkedIn page, Travis (2015) stresses that:

> [*A*]nniversaries can be a powerful symbol of a community. They generate a sense of belonging and place a commemorative stamp on the passing of time. They provide an opportunity to look back, with reflection often on their byproduct. Remembering during anniversaries is so important that it is a major relational *faux pas* to forget one. (n.p.)

Wymbs (2023) warns that an anniversary does not mean to say that longevity automatically equals integrity, but having a long and distinguished track record of leading and supporting the research community does bring with it a certain level of credibility and reassurance. This statement resonates well with the achievements that RITR took part in through conferences, publications and engaging in different levels of scholarship. Over the years, RITR has celebrated the trajectories of religion and theology starting with colonial theology, Black Consciousness, the Kairos theology, Black Theology and the transformation of South African theology from confrontational and defensive to engagement, and the call for the decoloniality of the God talk in South Africa.

Writing specifically on the reason journals celebrate, Wymbs (2023) argues that an anniversary is a great opportunity for a society and its journal to celebrate past achievements and reflect on the contributions they have made to the communities they serve in. In doing so, societies can shine a spotlight on their discipline while encouraging renewed membership and engagement. Jacobs et al. (2019) accentuate that a celebration is done as a reinvention of the past to fit contemporary beliefs. It is an ideal time to ask people to think together about why their work matters and how it should move forward. The reasons to celebrate anniversaries lead us into a discourse of the trajectories of theology from 1975 to 2025 to appreciate why the golden jubilee is a just cause.

Trajectories of religion and theology in South Africa from 1975 to 2025

Religion and theology during the apartheid era

Over the past 50 years, religion and theology have gone through many phases all defined by the socioeconomic and political situation of apartheid and the post-apartheid era. Although religion and theology were abused to suppress the

weak and poor South Africans for many years, this article is interested in the suppression and abuse of religion and theology from 1975 to 1994 as this is the period under review. The period was characterised by the perpetual dehumanisation of black South Africans. The Dutch Reformed Church used Christianity as a religion and theology as a tool to oppress the black people. The crisis of the church during the 1970s and 1980s was triggered by resistance to apartheid and government repression as a reaction to this resistance (De Gruchy 1991:218; Nurnberger & Tooke 1988:81; Pieterse 2001:26). 'For many years, theology was synonymous with pietism, fundamentalism, biblicism, and individual nominalism. It was incompetent to answer the question raised by black people who were all victims of apartheid' (Pieterse 2001:26). Christians who suffered under the oppression of apartheid started to ask questions of their circumstances such as (Maimela 1989):

> [*H*]ow can we find meaningful life worth living for in an unjust sociopolitical structure that was designed to deny the powerful people of colour their humanity and dignity? What conditions must be met or fulfilled so that every person may live a life in which he/she is granted dignity, justice, and human rights. (p. 6)

Black South Africans arose out of their experience as black people in the context of apartheid to use religion and theology to fight for their dignity. They struggled over those forces that deny the life of equality to the oppressed and the powerless black masses, while at the same time, these forces give preferential treatment to the powerful and the dominant section of South Africa (Maimela 1989:6). Questions pertaining to suffering, poverty, human dignity and liberation of black South Africans demanded answers. The black people also asked existential questions such as 'Is this the will of God? Can people do something? What is salvation in the context of suffering' (Pieterse 2001:6).

Black theologians were confronted with the challenge of a fundamental critique of the prevailing theology. Theology in South Africa, as elsewhere, tended to align with the prevailing institutions of power. To answer the question of faith of the poor and the oppressed, black theologians were compelled to accept the motif of the poor and the oppressed, namely that one must consider the historical process from the perspective of its victims (Nolan 1987:17). According to Maimela, 'God is the God who expresses a divine concern for the underdogs. These are the people who are pushed to the underside of history' (Buffel 2015:2). Given the confrontations of the rich and the poor as far as the position of God in human history is concerned, RITR found itself as a voice of reason through publishing articles on religion and theology addressing such trajectories.

Religion and theology as a tool of liberation: The Kairos document

The apartheid crisis and the abuse of religion and theology challenged the Liberation Black Theologians to question this use, abuse and misuse for the benefit of the minority at the detriment of the majority of South Africans. They used theology to attack theology, the Bible to counter the Bible and religion to fight religion. In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches propounded a bold statement on the state of apartheid in South Africa. They criticised the apartheid policy as heresy (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1987:74). For Richardson, charging apartheid as heresy was cogent, valid and helpful for the South African Church because apartheid theology was rooted in intolerable suffering, the failure of the official church to respond to the crisis and the divided church (Richardson 1986:1).

The Kairos Document was written as a response to the attempts to come to terms with the meaning of the Christian faith by groups in the black townships (Nolan 1987:71). It was an action of demythologising theology as a tool of oppression which was the opposite of the mission of God for humanity. Goba (1987:313) accentuates that 'the Kairos Document presented a theological response to the deepening political crisis in South Africa which had far-reaching consequences for the Christian community.' The Document reflected a typical, liberal response to the ongoing political crisis in South Africa.

The Kairos Document reflected the context of the oppressed where liberation in South Africa was born. It was a classical text of the South African liberation theology (Pieterse 2001:29). Moreover, the Document was a response to the prevailing theologies that had exhibited inadequacies and limitations in helping the Christian community to engage in the liberation struggle (Goba 1987:313). At their meetings and discussions, the Kairos theologians heard horror stories about police and army activities against black citizens as a response to their repression of revolt against apartheid. People were dying daily (The Kairos Theologians 1985:2). The people in the townships were subjugated to intolerable suffering. A great concern was that the police actions were being done in the name of Christianity. The state with its theology justified the actions by eisegeting Romans 13:1–2 which instructs citizens to be subject to governing authorities as there is no other authority but from God. The texts also compel people to be bound by the secular authorities as all authorities that exist were established by God (NIV).

During the apartheid era, the Christian soldiers were the ruling citizens and sometimes vice versa (Kairos Theologians 1985:7). The official church's response to apartheid with its church theology was divided into the white church vs black church (Kairos Theologians 1985:1). Part of the white theology justified apartheid. Theology had arrived at the crossroads (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1987:75). 'The option for the poor was a refusal of the church, its pastors, and theologians to be part of the dehumanising structures that cause and perpetuate poverty' (Martey 1993:97). The poor needed to be empowered in their circumstance, and the way was a hermeneutical privilege, which is the result of a rereading of the Bible using the hermeneutics of suspicion to liberate themselves.

Black Theology: A tool of liberating theology and an approach to liberate the black South Africans

The black people's experiences in South Africa were a seedbed for Black Theology and its subjects were 'liberation activists' (Moore 1991:1). For Tutu (1983):

> Black Theology arises in a context of Black suffering at the hands of rampant White racism. Consequently, Black Theology is much concerned with making sense theologically of the Black experience whose main ingredient is Black suffering, in the light of God's revelation of Himself in the Man, Jesus Christ. It is concerned with the significance of Black existence, with liberation, the meaning of reconciliation, humanisation, and forgiveness. It is much more aggressive and abrasive in its assertions, because of a burning and evangelistic zeal, as it must convert the Black man out of the stupor of his subservience and obsequiousness, to the acceptance of the thrilling and demanding responsibility of full personhood, to make him reach out to the glorious liberty of the sons of God. (pp. 58–59)

Tshaka and Makofane (2010) mention that:

> Black South Africans were galvanised by the political situation of their time, and they organise themselves into being a vanguard for the Black peoples' total emancipation from the political pangs into which they were plunged by white racism in South Africa. (p. 5345)

This point was buttressed by Basil Moore who emphasised that Black Theology profoundly affected religion, especially Christianity in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The traditional stance was that the clergy should not get involved in politics; however, 'Black Theology enabled the clergy to understand, that the Gospel was not primarily about the forgiveness of sins but about setting the oppressed free as such its approach was radical' (Moore 1991:1). This radical state was propelled by the emergence of Black Consciousness and was embraced by Black Theology resulting in Black Consciousness becoming an integral part of Black Theology (Resane 2021:4). It was the foundation laid by Steve Bantu Biko in his book *I write what I want* published in 1978 that gave Black theology in South Africa its unique place as it addressed unique challenges of South Africa (Boesak 1978:70). Biko laid the foundations for a strong grassroots Black Consciousness in which black people could learn to assert themselves and and take their rightful position (Van Aarde 2016:1). In fact, Black Consciousness emancipated Black Theology to give the black South Africans human dignity and a black identity. Black Theology confronted the imbalances of power and abusive power structures through an affirmation of human dignity and the uniqueness of the identity of black people (Van Aarde 2016:3).

Black Consciousness did not evolve in isolation; however, it should be viewed in conjunction with 'Black power, Black nationalism, Black identity, racial nationalism and racial internationalism' aimed at rehumanising the dehumanised Black South Africans (Van Aarde 2016:2).

Du Toit (2008) mentions:

> What made Biko's Black Consciousness stood the test of the time and beyond was the invocation of certain values underlying the struggle such as humanity, identity, self-respect, trust in oneself, responsibility, pathos, to name but a few. (p. 3)

Black Theology in South Africa was grounded in the life experiences of the poor masses, and Basil Moore prefers to call it 'situational theology' (Moore 1973:5), especially because South African black people are not a homogenous group but coexist in a multiplicity of situations (Van Aarde 2016:2). For Moore what tied Black theology in South Africa is its roots that each ethnic group had to be able to attain its style of existence without the fear and threat of loss of culture in relation to the other (Van Aarde 2016:3).

Although South Africa experienced a harsh wave of theology over a long period, the confrontational and defensive theology lost ground the moment the country obtained its independence in 1994. Chitando (2009:98) argues that 'Black theology in South Africa experienced a slump since the 1990s. Most of its practitioners have not been published'. Chitando (2009) further presents four reasons which justify the weaknesses of a former powerful form of human liberation. For Chitando (2009):

> [*O*]nly few younger Black theologians like Tinyiko Sam Maluleke continued to publish…One of the key distinguishing features of academic discipline is visibility through publication. Books, journals, electronic debates, conferences, and other communication strategies demonstrate the vibrancy of discipline. In the particular case of Black Theology, there have been no major books, journals, or conferences since the 1990s. Critics may therefore feel justified to argue that the discipline has undergone a decisive decline. Second, the leading voices are no longer as audible as they were previously. Individuals who used to publish black theological reflections like Desmond Tutu, Alan Boesak, Frank Chikane, Simon Maimela, Mokgethi Mothlabi and others are no longer doing so. Their voices have become inaudible in the new political dispensation. This has fuelled the perception that Black Theology has run out of steam. Third, the emergence of the majority government in South Africa in 1994 appears to have plunged Black Theology into uncertainty. Fourth, a good number of Black theologians have been absorbed into various positions since the emergence of democracy in South Africa. This is understandable as they have skills to contribute to the process of nation-building. (p. 97)

Chitando's assertion came as a caution coming true because Gabriel Setiloane had hinted that Black Theology was too dependent on the black and white scenario. Setiloane argued that 'as soon as the Black people attained their liberation, Black Theology ("would go out of business")' (Setiloane 1980:49). Chitando (2009:97) concluded that, 'the reality of political independence for the Black majority and the end of apartheid appears to have wrong-footed black theology in South Africa'.

Adebo (2013) states that:

> [*f*]ollowing the demise of apartheid, scholars like Charles Villa-Vicencio, Valpy Fitzgerald, and Jesse Mugambi have argued that Black Theology is no longer relevant in South Africa. They contend that it should be replaced with the theology of reconstruction. (p.1)

The challenges of confrontational theology led us to a new form of theology that South Africa is now grappling with namely, the decoloniality of theology; and RITR has also taken part in the publication of some of the decoloniality theologies. The author is cognisant of some voices that continue to push for the relevance of Black Theology in South Africa such as Tshaka and Makofane (2010) who retorted that:

> [*S*]ubsequent to the dawn of democracy in South Africa, many have surmised that speaking about Black Liberation Theology in such a context is not only irrelevant but a challenging attempt at uniting South Africa. On the contrary, it is reckless to think that Black liberation theology must cease to exist merely because we have attained political freedom. (p. 1)

Writing from the education point of departure, Baloyi (2024) argues that:

> [*T*]he quest for decolonisation and Africanisation of higher education in South African higher educational institutions has reached an uncompromising stage since colonial divisions between the natives and the colonisers are still evident in the education system. (p. 1)

Although Black Theology did not fully accomplish its mission, it is not within the confines of this article to debate on the relevant issues. It suffices to mention that Black Theology in South Africa ran its course with the independence of South Africa. Whatever debates may come with their relevance are not part of this historiography, as the country has moved to a new level of multiparty democracy, with the former coloniser and the former colonised sharing powers in the new government formed in 2024 between the African National Congress and the Democratic Alliance.

Decoloniality of theology: A new phase of theological negotiation

The weaknesses of Black Theology paved the way for the engagement of the former antagonists to redefine theology in the context of the new political dispensation. Most scholars agree that the decoloniality of the theology in the 21st century has dominated the academic field with both the former colonisers and the colonised advocating for decoloniality (Mujinga 2024:261). Writing from a South African perspective, Ward (2017:1) raised two questions: (1) how decolonised is South African theology; and if so, (2) how should this theology be decolonised? Ward proposed a three-stage method for decolonising theology in South Africa namely, 'provincialising the Western context as a background for doing theology in the Global South, second concerns the 'translation' of concepts into the differing contexts where theology is produced, and the third is related to the question of 'affirmation', in the sense of positively acknowledging culture as being reflective of the diversity of people groups' (Mujinga 2024:261; Ward 2017:1). The need for the decoloniality of theology was also echoed by Sakupapa (2019:406), who forwards that, 'African decolonial theology is the foregrounding of local, Indigenous, contextual knowledge in discourse and as the praxis of faith rooted in a contextual analysis of historical realities'. For Sakupapa, this decoloniality of theology contributes to the notion of ('mission from the margins') (2019:406). The fact that Sakupapa describes the decoloniality of theology as a mission from the margin presents a different way of theology that does not blame anyone but asks relevant questions.

Baloyi (2014:1) presents another dimension of decoloniality theology which demonstrates that although the weak and the powerful of the colonial are both advocating for the decolonisation of theology, who should lead in the projects of Africanisation and decolonisation? For Baloyi, this question must be discussed as a matter of urgency, suggesting that there is a need to go to a round table of the former coloniser and the colonised to redo theology (Baloyi 2014:1). Baloyi's question testifies the different levels that theology in South Africa has reached, that of negotiating and tolerance rather than confronting and accusing. Baloyi is convinced that the question of who Africanises or decolonises theology cannot be avoided if Africanisation and decolonisation must take speed (Baloyi 2024:1). This question also relates to Naidoo (2024) who argues that 'the imperial nature of Christianity structured around colonialism, White supremacy, and apartheid was governed by racially motivated logics that fundamentally defined the idea of who could be human'. This kind of controversial background still impacts the reinterpretation of the theology of South Africa thereby forwarding the need for engagement rather than confrontation. Savides (2022) believes that decoloniality can be employed as a theological hermeneutic to foster Christian unity and reconciliation. It investigates whether decoloniality can disrupt the settler colonial imaginary that developed from Eurocentrism, white supremacy, patriarchy and exploitative capitalist practices. The contribution of Savides presents a new form of religion and a new way of understanding God in South Africa.

On the one hand, colonialism is a complex power system that subjugated space, human beings and the minds of the colonised (Pali 2024:783) and on the other hand, decolonisation has a responsibility to remove colonial governance, liberate the colonised being and decentre the colonial knowledge and recentre the indigenous knowledge of the native people. The preceding statement calls for the need to redefine colonisation, the colonised and the coloniser as South Africa does not have a fluid relationship between the two rivals with the African National Congress and the Democratic being the government. Tonelli (2020:181) feels that 'decolonial theology is an ongoing process, requiring the readiness of all actors involved (both former colonised and colonisers)'. Tonelli also warns that, in the process of negotiating faith, 'the greatest risks come from the prevalent feeling of revenge and a too strong influence of politics and theological thinking, but a high-quality level of dialogue is a good way to avoid radicalism and extremism, but also to build a new and common perspective' (Tonelli 2020:181). Unlike blemish theology, decoloniality of theology calls into question the importance of building a common narrative as an essential part of the decolonial process in its political and epistemic aspects. For Tonelli (2020), decoloniality of theology is a strategy for change and as an open response to dialogue. This represents

a new dimension of theology in South Africa, distinct from the colonial theology that was confrontational and subjective.

The future of theology and the task of the Research Institute of Theology and Research in South Africa

The article discusses how religion and theology navigated and transformed the history of South Africa from oppressive and defensive to negotiative and decoloniality, envisaging another phase of engaging God from 2025. In this article, I argue that the rate at which religion and theology have evolved in South Africa, and how former political opponents formed a Unity Government, also necessitates a change in theology, as the former enemies are now dining and socialising together. The RITR needs to engage in theologies of reconciliation, reconstruction, dialogue and unity in diversity. The theology of reconciliation reengages the memories of a subjective and liberating God who was preached from 1975 to 1994. Reconstruction Theology engages a new way of redoing religion and theology in the context of a politically unified South Africa. This theology has been advocated by several scholars such as Jesse Mugambi. Gunda (2009:84) argues that Reconstruction Theology in Africa has been the latest theological project coming out of Africa. Beginning in 1990, it has gradually established itself; and since 2003 several publications have come out on the subject. This period of the 1990s coincides with the independence of South Africa which got this freedom through confrontation and yet there was no one to confront in the new dispensation as the black were now in power.

Reconstructing Theology moves South Africa forward from the ugly past and faces the reality of the new meaning of divine revelation. Moreover, it presents itself (Matumona 2008):

> [*A*]s an ideal approach at a time when the continent intends to renew itself. At the heart of the reconstruction of the continent is the reconstruction of the human person, of African men and women whose dignity is still denied in many cases. (p.26)

Mazoa and Santana (2009) argue that 'the theology of reconstruction offers a privileged place from which Christ can be found by Africans and where the notions of salvation and reconstruction take on greater meaning'. This theology values the religious and historical experience of the African people. Looking at the African reality, and countless crisis situations in Africa, both material and existential, it calls for serious and authentic reconstruction where both the powerful and the weak are invited to a negotiating table. This task does not belong to a person or institution exclusively. On the contrary, it needs to involve everyone if it is to be effective (Matumona 2008:201). The RITR is therefore challenged to engage in conferences, debates, publications, webinars and symposiums to redefine religion and theology in the context of neutralised male dominance in leadership and power sharing in the South African Government by former opponents. Reconstruction Theology allows the South Africans to appreciate their 'rainbowism' as a nation and their diversity to bring about unity in Christ.

Conclusion

The RITR celebrates 50 years of religion and theology traversing across different phases of God talk in South Africa. From 1975, theology moved from abusive to confrontational with the latter being accredited to the independence of South Africa. The RITR has celebrated all these trajectories. Over the years, religion and theology in South Africa changed the tone from confrontational and defensive to decoloniality. The post-independent theology drew theology far from its past. The apartheid theology, Black Consciousness, Black Theology and decoloniality describe the trends that South Africa endured. Now that the former antagonists, the African National Congress and the Democratic Alliance share powers in the government, it is imperative to redefine theology as inclusive God-talk. Such engagement proves that theology is not static nor is religion stagnant. God continues to reveal the Godself in all circumstances and the RITR has a challenge to be in this space of theological transformation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interest

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Author's contribution

M.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences Research and Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 17 October 2024. The ethics approval number is Rec-240816-052.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in public, commercial or not-for profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Adebo, A., 2013, *The relevance of black theology in post-apartheid South Africa*, viewed 05 October 2024, from, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346653618_THE_RELEVANCE_OF_BLACK_THEOLOGY_IN_POST-APARTHIED_SOUTH_AFRICA.

Baloyi, M.E., 2024, 'Who must lead decoloniality: A practical theological interrogation on the possible qualification to lead decolonisation: A South African study', *Phronimon* 25, 13880. https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/13880

Biko, S., 1978, *I write what I like*, A. Stubbs (ed.), Picador Africa, Johannesburg.

Boesak, A., 1978, *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on Black Theology and Black power*, WIPF & Stock, Eugene, OR.

Buffel, O., 2015, 'Preferential option for the poor in the current context of poverty in South Africa', *Missionalia: South African Journal of Missiology* 43(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.7832/43-3-123

Chitando, E., 2009, *Troubled but not destroyed: African theology in dialogue with HIV and AIDS*, World Council of Churches, Geneva.

De Gruchy, J., 1991, *Liberating reformed theology: A South African contribution to an ecumenical debate*, David Phillip, Cape Town.

Du Toit, C., 2008, 'Black consciousness as an expression of radical responsibility: Biko an African Bonhoeffer', *Religion & Theology* 15(1), 25–52. https://doi.org/10.1163/157430108X308145

Goba, B., 1987, 'Kairos document and its implications for liberation in South Africa', *Journal of Law and Religion* 5(2), 313–325. https://doi.org/10.2307/1051239

Gunda, M.R., 2009, 'African theology of reconstruction: The painful realities and practical options!', *Exchange* 38(1), 84–102. https://doi.org/10.1163/157254309X381174

Jacobs, A., Leach, C., Rosoff, N.G. & Spencer, S., 2019, 'Celebration, commemoration, and collaboration: Milestones in the history of education', *History of Education* 48(2), 151–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2018.1555286

Kairos Theologians, 1985, *Third World theology, the Kairos Document: A theological comment of the political crisis in South Africa*, Russel Press, Bloemfontein.

Köstlin, K., 2015, 'Perspectives of European Ethnology', *Ethnologia Europaea* 26(2), 169–180, viewed 05 October 2014, from https://ee.openlibhums.org/article/id/859/.

Maimela, S.S, 1989, 'Faith that does justice', *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 3(1), 1–14.

Martey, E., 1993, *African theology: Inculturation and liberation*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Matumona, M., 2018, *African theology of reconstruction as a new epistemological paradigm*, Lisbon, Rome.

Mazoa, C.M. & Santana, S.C., 2009, *The importance of African theology of reconstruction in contemporaneity*, Critical Investigations into Humanity in Africa, viewed 05 October 2024, from https://www.cihablog.com/the-importance-of-african-theology-of-reconstruction-in-contemporaneity/.

Moore, B.J., 1973, *Black Theology revested*, viewed 04 October 2024, from https://www.benkhumalo-seegelken.de/wp-content/uploads/Black-Theology.pdf.

Moore, B.J., 1991, 'Black Theology: In the beginning', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 4(2), 19.

Mugambi, J.N.K., 1996, 'Vision of the African Church in mission', *Missionalia: South African Journal of Missioiology* 24(2), 233–248.

Mujinga, M., 2024, 'Decoloniality in theology today: The quest to liberate United Theological College's curriculum from foreign god talk', *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)* 10(7), 260–273. https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.20241072

Naidoo, M., 2024, 'The mediation of coloniality in decolonisation developments in South African Theological Education', *Religions* 15(2), 160. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020160

Nolan, A., 1987, *God in South Africa*, David Phillip, Cape Town.

Nurnberger, K. & Tooke, J. (eds), 1988, *The cost of reconciliation in South Africa*, Methodist Publishing House, Cape Town.

Pali, K.J., 2024, 'Markers and tools to facilitate decolonisation of theological education in Africa', *Religions* 15(7), 783. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070783

Parratt, J., 1990, 'Marxism, Black Theology, and the South African dilemma', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 26(3), 527–533. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00054690

Pieterse, H.J.C., 2001, *South African Liberation Theology*, pp. 26–36, Brill, viewed 30 September 2024, from https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004494046/B978900 4494046_s004.xml.

Resane, K.T., 2021, 'Black Consciousness, Black Nationalism and Black Theology: Is there a possibility for theology of dialogue?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(3), a6418. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6418

Richardson, N., 1986, 'Apartheid, heresy, and the church in South Africa', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14(1), 1–21.

Sakupapa, T.C., 2019, 'Decolonising content of African Theology and the decolonisation of African theology reflections on a decolonial future for African Theology', *Missionalia Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 46(3), 406–424. https://doi.org/10.7832/46-3-277

Sakupapa, T.C., 2023, 'Decoloniality of theology: Tracking the decolonial in African Christian Theology: A Southern African perspective on mission from the margins as a decolonial mode of mission', *International Review of Mission* 112(2), 202–217. https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12476

Savides, S.T., 2022, 'Unsettling the settler colonial imagination: Decoloniality as a theological hermeneutic in South Africa?', Unpublished PhD, Thesis, University of Notre Dame.

Setiloane, G.M., 1980, 'Theological trends in Africa', *Missionalia Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 8(2), 47–53.

The Awareness Centre, n.d., viewed 30 September 2024, from https://theawarenesscentre.com/anniversaries/#:~:text=Whatever%20the%20anniversary%2C%20it%20gives,of%20understanding%20who%20we%20are.

Tonelli, D., 2020, 'Decolonial Theology as an ongoing process: The importance of a common narrative', *Annali di studi religiosi* 2, 181–197.

Travis, S., 2015, *Why do we celebrate anniversaries?*, viewed 30 September 2024, from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-do-we-celebrate-anniversaries-scott-travis/.

Tshaka, R.S. & Makofane, M.K., 2010, 'The continued relevance of Black liberation theology for democratic South Africa today', *Scriptura* 105(2010), 532–546. https://doi.org/10.7833/105-0-155

Tutu, D., 1983, *Hope and suffering: Sermons and speeches*, Skotaville Academic Publishing, Johannesburg.

University of South Africa, 2003, *Research Institute for Theology and Religion*, viewed 30 September 2024, from https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges/Human-Sciences/Schools,-departments,-centres,-institutes-&-units/Institutes/Research-Institute-for-Theology-and-Religion.

University of South Africa, 2023, *Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR)*, viewed 24 September 2024, from https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Research-&-Innovation/Reports/2021/Research-Institute-for-Theology-and-Religion-(RITR).

University of South Africa, 2024, *Fifty years of theological and religion research: The history of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (1975–2025)*, Unpublished Call for Papers.

Van Aarde, T., 2016, 'Black theology in South Africa – A theology of human dignity and Black identity', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 72(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3176

Villa- Vicencio, C. & De Gruchy, J., 1987, *Apartheid is heresy*, Lutterworth Press, Cambridge.

Walshe, P., 1987, 'The evolution of liberation theology in South Africa', *Journal of Law and Religio*n 5(2), 299–311. https://doi.org/10.2307/1051238

Ward, G., 2017, 'Decolonizing theology', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3(2), 561–584.

West, G., 2021, 'A Decolonial (Re)turn', *Old Testament Essays* 34(2), 530–553. https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2020/v34n2a13

Wymbs, S., 2023, *Creative ways to celebrate journal and society anniversaries*, Elsevier, viewed 30 September 2024, from https://www.elsevier.com/connect/creative-ways-to-celebrate-journal-and-society-anniversaries.