

The blunt and frank: A critique of Nelson Mandela and José Rizal for the liberative motif today



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This article provides a missional and comparative critique of Nelson Mandela and José Rizal, examining their liberative motifs in the context of Christ's liberative mission. Thirty years into democracy in South Africa and a century after the liberation of the Philippines, the ideals of equality, justice and quality of life espoused by these historical figures remain elusive. The majority of their people continue to grapple with inequality, poverty and unemployment. This article explores the theological and missional implications of their struggles, reflecting on the unfinished work of liberation and the lessons their lives offer for contemporary generations.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: By examining their strategies, successes and shortcomings in light of the *missio Dei* [mission of God], this article seeks to inspire a renewed commitment to holistic liberation in the face of persistent systemic injustices.

Keywords: *missio Dei*; heroes; global south; missional; liberative mission.

Introduction

Nelson Mandela and José Rizal are celebrated as heroes of liberation in their respective nations (Boesak 2017:178; Zanker 2024:59). Mandela's leadership in the anti-apartheid struggle transformed South Africa's political landscape (Mpofu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:175), while Rizal's intellectual contributions inspired the Philippine Revolution against Spanish colonial rule (Agoncillo 1985). Both figures are revered for their courage, sacrifice and unwavering commitment to justice. They are both hailed as revolutionary and transformative leaders in many respects (Mashau 2023:1; Read 2010:337). However, their legacies also invite critical reflection (Boehmer 2019:1179; Morris 2003:33). While they achieved significant milestones in their lifetimes, the systemic issues they sought to address persist. South Africa, despite its transition to democracy, remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with high levels of poverty, unemployment and racial inequality. Beresford (2014:297) opines that this is the politics of South Africa's unfinished liberation. Similarly, the Philippines continues to struggle with corruption, poverty and social inequality, despite over a century of independence. This is further exacerbated by the advent of neo-liberal politics (Rodan 2021:233).

The liberation struggles of Nelson Mandela and José Rizal, though separated by time, geography and context, share a common thread: the pursuit of freedom, justice and dignity for their people. Mandela, the anti-apartheid revolutionary and first black president of South Africa (Rwafa 2017:6), and Rizal, the Filipino nationalist and intellectual who became a martyr for his country's independence, both envisioned societies free from the chains of colonial oppression and systemic inequality. Yet, decades after their sacrifices, the ideals they fought for remain unfulfilled for the majority of their people. South Africa, 30 years into democracy, and the Philippines, over 100 years after its liberation from colonial rule, continue to grapple with systemic issues such as inequality, poverty and unemployment. These persistent challenges raise important questions about the effectiveness and limitations of their liberative strategies.

This article examines their lives, missions and legacies through the lens of the *missio Dei* as grounded in the grand narrative of history (Wright 2006) and Bosch (1991)'s transformative missiological paradigm. While God's life of communion in the Trinity and God's involvement in history (Niemandt 2012:8) remain the foundational basis of this paradigm, Christ's liberative motif remains our focal point, and in particular his transformative leadership model and agenda, as also spelled out in Luke 4:18–19. Christ's liberative motif –the holistic liberation of humanity from sin, oppression and injustice – offers a framework for critiquing their strategies and outcomes. By comparing their approaches to liberation, this article seeks to draw lessons for today's generation, tasked with continuing the unfinished work of justice and equality. In doing

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so, it explores the theological implications of their struggles and reflects on the liberative motif as a guiding principle for addressing the ongoing challenges of systemic injustice in South Africa, the Philippines and beyond.

Research objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- Examine the lives and historical contexts of Nelson Mandela and José Rizal, with a focus on their roles as liberators in their respective societies.
- Analyse their liberative motifs in light of the *missio Dei*, exploring the theological and missional implications of their struggles.
- Identify the successes and shortcomings of their strategies for liberation, particularly in addressing systemic issues such as inequality, poverty and oppression.
- To draw lessons from their lives and struggle for contemporary efforts towards justice and equality.
- Reflect on the unfinished work of liberation in South Africa and the Philippines, and the role of today's generation in continuing this mission.

Literature review

The life and history of Nelson Mandela

According to Mpofu and Ndlovu-Gatcheni (2018:178), Nelson Mandela was born on 18 July 1918 at Mvezo, Transkei, in the Eastern Cape Province. He is one of the most iconic figures of the 21st century (Makamani 2015:56; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni 2018:9). Mandela was born into the Thembu royal family, part of the Xhosa-speaking people, and was given the name 'Rolihlahla', meaning 'pulling the branch of a tree', or informally, 'troublemaker'. His early life was shaped by traditional African values and the oppressive realities of colonial rule and racial segregation (Mandela 1994). Having been raised in this environment shaped Mandela's philosophy of life and helped him remain grounded and an example of modesty in dealing with others. Makamani (2015:64–65) argued that in terms of philosophy of life, characterised by commitment and thinking about the other, Mandela remains a 'village boy'.

Mandela's formal education began at local mission schools, where he was given the English name 'Nelson' by a teacher, in line with colonial customs. He later attended the University of Fort Hare, one of the few institutions offering higher education to black South Africans (Mandela 1994). However, his time at Fort Hare was cut short when he was expelled for participating in a student protest. He moved to Johannesburg, where he completed his law degree through correspondence at the University of South Africa and became involved in anti-apartheid activism.

Mandela's political career began in earnest when he joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1943. He co-founded the ANC Youth League, advocating for a more radical approach to ending apartheid. Over time, his activism intensified, and he became a prominent leader in the struggle

against apartheid. In 1961, Mandela helped establish *Umkhonto we Sizwe* [Spear of the Nation], the armed wing of the ANC, which sought to overthrow apartheid infrastructure without targeting civilians. As much as he was a great listener in his shared leadership practices (Makamani 2015:65; Mashau 2023:2) and would have preferred a non-violent approach to overthrow the apartheid government, he was pushed by the violent apartheid regime to embrace violence as noted in the following words (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni 2018):

It was the violence and brutality of apartheid colonialism that forced Mandela and others in the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) to embrace violence as a tool of liberation. (p. 11)

In 1962, Mandela was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in anti-apartheid activities. Having endured the pain of suffering for the justice of his people, it is noted that (Rwafa 2017):

On a political level, Mandela has proved his mettle and wisdom by reaching out to the old enemy, repress any vengeful impulse he might have accumulated during his 27 years in prison as well as consolidate South Africa's transition from tyranny to democracy. (p. 4)

He, without doubt, endured the harsh conditions at Robben Island, where he was a political prisoner, to become a symbol of resistance and hope for millions upon his release (Mandela 1994; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni 2018:11). It was during his trial, imprisonment, and his release that his stature as a global icon became validated, especially with international campaigns demanding his release. Upon his release in 1990, as apartheid began to crumble under internal and external pressure, Mandela came out to play a pivotal role in negotiating South Africa's transition to democracy, emphasising reconciliation and unity over vengeance. In 1994, Mandela became South Africa's first black president, serving as a symbol of the country's newfound freedom and equality. His presidency focused on nation-building, reconciliation and addressing the deep scars left by apartheid (Mandela 1994). It is these kinds of courageous acts that earned him a messiah status in the global community. Rwafa (2017:1) opined that in liberal-driven South African and Western media, Mandela is/was presented as a 'messiah', a superhuman character, a humanist, a philanthropist and a *persona* who works as an ideal model for what constitutes modern African political leadership.

Mandela's legacy extends far beyond South Africa. He is celebrated as a global symbol of peace, justice and human dignity. His life is a testament to resilience, sacrifice and an unwavering commitment to justice and equality. It is asserted that Mandela was so committed to opposing the injustice of apartheid, with its logic of racism and colonialism and its paradigm of war, that he was prepared to die for the cause of democracy and human rights long before these values were globally accepted as part of the post-Cold War international normative order (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni 2018:11).

Mandela passed away on 05 December 2013, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire movements for justice and equality worldwide.

The life and history of José Rizal

José Protacio Rizal Mercado y Alonzo Realonda, born on 19 June 1861, in Calamba, Laguna, Philippines, was a polymath, nationalist and martyr who became a central figure in the Philippine struggle for independence from Spanish colonial rule. Rizal was the seventh of 11 children in a wealthy and well-educated family. His parents, Francisco Mercado and Teodora Alonzo (Agoncillo 1985), instilled in him a love for learning and a strong sense of justice.

Rizal's education began at the Ateneo Municipal de Manila, where he excelled academically, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree with high honours. He later studied medicine at the University of Santo Tomas but left because of racial discrimination and hostility from the Spanish authorities.

Determined to further his education, Rizal travelled to Europe, where he studied medicine and philosophy at the Universidad Central de Madrid. He also pursued ophthalmology studies in Paris and Heidelberg to treat his mother's failing eyesight (Agoncillo 1985). Francia (2014) asserts:

[T]he young man soaked in the ideas of the Enlightenment, finding in Europe a more secular spirit than would have existed in the Manila of his time – the ironic trajectory of the colonial moving to metropolitan centre and there finding the intellectual freedom to sharpen his anticolonial arsenal. (pp. 46–47)

While in Europe, Rizal became deeply involved in the Propaganda Movement, which sought reforms in the Philippines through peaceful means (Francia 2014:51). He wrote extensively, using his literary talents to expose the injustices of Spanish colonial rule. His novels, *Noli Me Tangere* (Rizal 1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (Rizal 1891), are considered masterpieces of Philippine literature. It is further noted, 'Rizal's novels, along with his other writings – examples of the empire writing back – had laid the groundwork of nationalist consciousness' (Francia 2014:47). These works depicted the oppression and corruption of Spanish authorities and the Catholic Church, inspiring Filipinos to fight for their rights and dignity.

Rizal returned to the Philippines in 1892 and founded *La Liga Filipina*, a peaceful reformist organisation (Francia 2014:51). However, his activism made him a target of the colonial government. According to Francia (2014:52), 'This time, Despujol had Rizal arrested and exiled to the coastal town and Jesuit mission of Dapitan, on the northwestern coast of Mindanao, the second-biggest island in the country'. It was from this place where he continued his work as a teacher, doctor and community leader. It is asserted, 'He spent his time teaching, writing, researching various projects, and practicing medicine' (Morris 2003:28). Francia (2014:52) further notes, 'There, he founded a school for boys and an eye clinic, where he treated town residents for free'. Despite

his peaceful approach, Rizal's ideas inspired the Philippine Revolution, led by the Katipunan, a revolutionary group advocating for independence. In 1896, Rizal was implicated in the revolution and arrested. He was tried for sedition, rebellion and conspiracy and was sentenced to death by the firing squad (Morris 2003:29). On 30 December 1896, Rizal was executed by firing squad at Bagumbayan (now Luneta Park) in Manila.

His death turned him into a martyr and galvanised the Filipino people in their fight for independence (Royeca 2022). Some considered Rizal to be a type of Christ as recorded in the following words: 'Learning of his death, the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno characterised Rizal as "the Tagalog Christ"' (Francia 2014:54). His mission and contribution are summed up in the following words (Morris 2003):

[T]hough only 35 years old at his demise, Rizal was already immortal in his pursuit of justice and liberty. He went to his death not knowing that in death, he would give birth to a new nation; but he did so as an example of the necessary risk that must be taken to guarantee that such institutions are founded, defended, and perpetuated. (p. 33)

Rizal's legacy is deeply embedded in Philippine history and identity. He is celebrated as the national hero of the Philippines, symbolising the struggle for freedom, education and human dignity (Wirth 2023:259). However, a century after his death, the Philippines continues to face challenges of poverty, corruption and inequality, underscoring the unfinished work of his liberative vision.

Findings and discussion

Christ's liberative motif and the *missio Dei*

The concept of the *missio Dei* is grounded in the idea that God's mission is one of holistic liberation, encompassing the spiritual, social, economic and political dimensions of human existence (Francis 2013). At its core, the *missio Dei* is a call to restore human dignity, challenge systemic injustices and create conditions for the flourishing of all creation. This mission is evident in Christ's liberative motif, as demonstrated in his ministry, death and resurrection. Christ's life and teachings embodied a radical commitment to justice, mercy and inclusion, particularly for the poor and marginalised. His proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:18–19) emphasised liberation from sin, oppression and suffering, offering a vision of a just and equitable world. Reflecting on the designation of Jesus as a Messiah and his liberation agenda, Scheffler (2003) says:

[T]herefore, according to the Gospel of Luke, that Jesus is the Messiah means that he suffers with the sufferers in society and that he practices a ministry which consists of action (word and deed) on their behalf. (p. 208)

Scheffler (2003) adds:

Jesus is not selective in his work with people and that all forms of suffering (economic, political, social, physical, psychological or religious) demand his attention' (p. 208).

Liberation theology, as articulated by theologians like Gutiérrez (1971), builds on this foundation by emphasising the preferential option for the poor to resist injustice and restore human dignity, asserting that God's mission is fundamentally aligned with the struggles of the oppressed. This perspective asserts theological engagement with political liberators to advance the conditions of life, justice and humanisation. In addition, Vellem (2015) opines that:

[T]his is not a fixed position of Black Theology of Liberation, but a revelation from the Cross of Jesus in whose obedience the preferential option for the poor remains the locus of the manifestation of God's grace. (p. 12)

Hence, the contextual framing of Jesus as the black Jesus in Black Theology of Liberation as captured in the following words (McKinnis 2016):

[A]s Black Jesus, Jesus makes the suffering and the oppression of Blacks his suffering. Jesus, in his blackness, is a constituent of an oppressed community, and subsequently, rejects racism and is understood as a co-sufferer with humanity. (p. 247)

Theological participation beyond explicit faith

A key theological question underpinning this study is whether participation in the *missio Dei* requires explicit confession of faith or conscious reference to God's will. Missiological scholarship has long affirmed that God's mission precedes and exceeds the institutional Church, unfolding into the broader arena of human history (Bosch 1991; Wright 2006). This article, therefore, distinguishes between explicit and implicit participation in God's mission. Explicit participation refers to actors who self-consciously locate their work within the framework of divine calling, ecclesial mission or gospel proclamation. Implicit participation, by contrast, refers to historical actors whose liberative praxis functionally aligns with the values and trajectories of the Kingdom of God – justice, reconciliation, human dignity and the restoration of the oppressed – even when such actors do not articulate theological motivations (Bevans & Schroeder 2004; Gutiérrez 1971). This functional alignment does not presume doctrinal intent. Still, it recognises that God's mission, as understood in missiological theology, may unfold through diverse historical agents and movements oriented towards life, justice and liberation (Bosch 1991).

Biblical precedent supports this broader theological imagination. In Isaiah 45, Cyrus of Persia is named as God's 'anointed', despite standing outside Israel's covenantal faith, because his political actions served God's redemptive purposes in history (Wright 2006). Such texts open space for interpreting political liberators as instruments within the broader economy of God's mission without collapsing theological intentionality into political action. Accordingly, this study employs a retrospective theological reading: it does not claim that Mandela or Rizal historically intended to participate in the *missio Dei*, but rather that, when viewed through a missiological lens, dimensions of their liberative work may be understood as resonant

with – while not exhaustive of – Christ's holistic liberative motif (Bevans & Schroeder 2004; Bosch 1991).

Furthermore, for Bosch, mission is not first the activity of the Church but the movement of God towards the world; the Church participates in, rather than possesses, this mission (Bosch 1991). This reframing dislocates mission from purely ecclesiastical structures and situates it within the broader arena of human history, including political, social and cultural processes. Bosch thus opens theological space for discerning God's salvific and liberative work within secular historical movements oriented towards justice, reconciliation and human dignity. Mission, in this sense, is Trinitarian in origin, historical in expression and holistic in scope, embracing liberation from personal sin as well as structural oppression (Bosch 1991).

Hence, Nelson Mandela and José Rizal, although neither was a religious leader in the traditional sense, both can be seen as secular prophets who embodied aspects of Christ's liberative motif. Their commitment to justice, willingness to challenge oppressive systems and sacrifices for the liberation of their people reflect key elements of the *missio Dei*. However, a missional critique reveals that while their efforts aligned with certain aspects of this divine mission, their approaches fell short of achieving the comprehensive vision of holistic liberation that the *missio Dei* entails. This section explores both the strengths and weaknesses of their liberative motifs, drawing on theological perspectives to evaluate their contributions and limitations.

Strengths of their liberative motifs

Visionary leadership

One of the most compelling strengths of Mandela's and Rizal's liberative motifs is their visionary leadership. Both men articulated a powerful vision of justice, equality and human dignity that inspired their people to resist oppression and strive for a better future. Mandela's leadership during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy demonstrated a Christ-like commitment to reconciliation and unity. Rather than seeking vengeance for the injustices of apartheid, Mandela emphasised forgiveness and nation-building. It is asserted (Mashau 2023):

[P]resident Mandela had a clear vision for a rainbow nation, one sustained by efforts to drive the spirit of social cohesion, embedded in ubuntu ethos and call for national reconciliation and unity in a country highly polarised along tribal and ethnic divides. (p. 1)

In addition, it is further remarked, 'Indeed, Mandela's liberatory vision of inventing a new world in which racism would not be a determinant of people's chances in life continues to enchant the world' (Mpofu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:174).

Mandela's leadership in creating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) exemplified his belief in restorative

justice, which sought to heal the wounds of the past while fostering a sense of shared humanity among South Africans (Tutu 1999). This approach reflects Christ's teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation, as seen in Matthew 5:9, where Jesus says, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God'. Mandela's emphasis on reconciliation aligns with Pope John Paul II's (1995) encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, which underscores the importance of building a culture of life and reconciliation in the face of systemic violence and oppression.

Similarly, Rizal's intellectual leadership highlighted the transformative power of education and moral reform. Through his writings, particularly *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, Rizal (1887, 1891) exposed the injustices of Spanish colonial rule and awakened a sense of national consciousness among Filipinos. His vision of a free and just society, especially for those in the *laylayan* (Del Castillo 2022, 2024) and the marginalised, was rooted in the belief that education and enlightenment were essential to true liberation. Rizal's commitment to peaceful reform, despite the violent oppression he faced, reflects Christ's emphasis on nonviolence and the power of truth to challenge injustice. His intellectual approach aligns with the philosophical principles of Kant (1785[1997]), who emphasised the role of reason and moral autonomy in the pursuit of human dignity. Rizal's writings continue to inspire generations, demonstrating the enduring impact of his visionary leadership.

Sacrificial commitment

Another key strength of Mandela's and Rizal's liberative motifs lies in their sacrificial commitment to people's liberation. Both leaders were willing to endure immense personal suffering in pursuit of justice. Mandela's 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island symbolise his unwavering dedication to the anti-apartheid struggle. Despite the harsh conditions of his imprisonment, Mandela remained steadfast in his commitment to the ideals of equality and freedom. His willingness to sacrifice his personal freedom for the greater good of his people mirrors Christ's sacrificial love, as seen in John 15:13: 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends'. Mandela's sacrificial commitment resonates with the theological reflections of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who argued that true discipleship requires a willingness to suffer for the sake of others (Bonhoeffer 1959).

Rizal's martyrdom similarly exemplifies his profound commitment to justice. His execution by firing squad in 1896 turned him into a national hero and a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression. Rizal's willingness to face death rather than compromise his principles reflects Christ's own sacrifice on the cross. Pope Francis (2013), in *Evangelii Gaudium*, highlights the importance of self-sacrifice in the pursuit of justice, calling Christians to embody the courage and humility of Christ in their efforts to transform the world. Both Mandela and Rizal understood that true liberation often comes at great personal cost, and their sacrifices continue to inspire movements for justice and equality around the world.

Empowerment of the oppressed

A third strength of Mandela's and Rizal's liberative motifs lies in their ability to empower the oppressed. Mandela's leadership in the ANC mobilised millions of South Africans to resist apartheid. Through grassroots organising, protests and international advocacy, the ANC became a powerful force for change, giving voice to the marginalised and demanding justice on their behalf. Mandela's ability to unite people across racial and ethnic lines reflects Christ's inclusive vision of the kingdom of God, where all are valued and empowered to participate in God's mission. This inclusivity aligns with the biblical principle articulated in Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

Rizal's writings similarly empowered Filipinos to recognise their worth and resist colonial oppression. By exposing the injustices of Spanish rule and advocating for reform, Rizal inspired a sense of national pride and identity among his people. His work laid the intellectual foundation for the Philippine Revolution, demonstrating the power of ideas to challenge oppressive systems and inspire collective action. Rizal's emphasis on empowerment reflects the philosophical insights of Freire (1970), who argued that education is a tool for the oppressed to achieve liberation and reclaim their humanity. Both Mandela and Rizal understood that true liberation requires empowering the oppressed to take ownership of their struggle and work towards their own freedom.

Shortcomings of their strategies

Failure to address structural inequality

Despite their many strengths, Mandela's and Rizal's liberative strategies had significant shortcomings, particularly in addressing structural inequality. Mandela's focus on political liberation and reconciliation, while essential for South Africa's transition to democracy, did not adequately address the economic structures of apartheid. Land redistribution, economic empowerment and the dismantling of systemic economic inequality were largely neglected during Mandela's presidency. As a result, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with the majority of black South Africans continuing to face poverty and unemployment (Turok 2008). This failure to address structural inequality highlights a gap in Mandela's liberative motif, as true liberation requires not only political freedom but also economic justice. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014:918) noted that: 'By the time of Mandela's death, the economic kingdom was still undelivered'. Hence, he is considered by some to be a 'sell-out' for failing to deliver the economic freedom for black people (Mpofu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:175). Pope Benedict XVI (2009), in *Caritas in Veritate*, emphasises the importance of addressing economic disparities as a fundamental aspect of social justice, calling for a more equitable distribution of resources to promote the common good.

Similarly, Rizal's reformist approach left the Philippines vulnerable to continued inequality under new forms of colonialism. While Rizal's emphasis on education and moral reform was transformative (Constantino 1975), it did not directly challenge the systemic economic exploitation that kept Filipinos in poverty (Fanon 1963). After gaining independence from Spain, the Philippines became a colony of the United States, and many of the same patterns of inequality and exploitation persisted. Rizal's failure to address these structural issues reflects a limitation in his vision of liberation, as true freedom requires the dismantling of all forms of systemic oppression.

Limited holistic vision

Another shortcoming of Mandela's and Rizal's liberative motifs is their limited holistic vision. While both leaders fought for justice and equality, their strategies did not fully align with the comprehensive vision of the *missio Dei*. Mandela's emphasis on reconciliation, though admirable, often came at the expense of justice for the victims of apartheid. The TRC, while promoting healing and forgiveness, did not hold many perpetrators accountable for their crimes, leaving many victims feeling that justice was incomplete (Boraine 2000). This reflects a tension between reconciliation and justice that Mandela's liberative motif did not fully resolve; hence, his ideal of a rainbow South Africa remains elusive and just a dream in a country which is highly racially polarised (Mashau 2018:1). Mashau further opines, 'Colonial and apartheid hangovers, including racial stereotypes across different races, are still prevalent in our communities, both in public and private spaces'. Furthermore, Mandela seems to have gained political power at the expense of economic freedom for the majority of black people. It is concluded that: 'But ever since South Africa got independence, there was not much improvement experienced by the ordinary people, especially in the sphere of economics' (Rwafa 2017:9). The status quo remains to date.

Rizal's focus on education and peaceful reform, while transformative, did not address the immediate material needs of the poor and marginalised. His vision of liberation was largely intellectual and moral, neglecting the social and economic dimensions of the *missio Dei*. This limited holistic vision highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to liberation that addresses all aspects of human flourishing, as emphasised by Gutiérrez (1971) in his call for an integral liberation encompassing every dimension of human life.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. It focuses narrowly on Mandela and Rizal, excluding other figures whose strategies could provide broader insights. The context-specific analysis may not fully address the diverse global realities of systemic injustice, and the theological lens of the *missio Dei* may overlook secular or alternative frameworks influencing their

efforts. Emphasis on their leadership downplays the role of grassroots movements, and the critique lacks empirical evidence to measure the long-term impact of their strategies. Additionally, the study does not adequately address intersectionality, thereby simplifying the complexities of liberation and marginalisation.

Future research should expand to include other global leaders, assess the long-term impact of liberative efforts with empirical data and explore intersectionality, particularly regarding gender, ethnicity and class. A more comprehensive framework for holistic liberation, integrating theological, philosophical and socio-economic perspectives is needed. Investigating grassroots contributions, challenges in post-liberation societies, and the role of education and economic justice in liberation could provide deeper insights. Lastly, examining how their legacies influence contemporary movements would help adapt their liberative motifs to modern struggles for justice and equality.

Conclusion

The selection of Nelson Mandela and José Rizal is neither incidental nor merely illustrative but guided by specific methodological and theological criteria. Firstly, both figures are located within anti-colonial liberation struggles in the Global South, confronting racially and imperially structured systems of domination – apartheid in South Africa and Spanish colonialism in the Philippines (Beresford 2014; Schumacher 1997). Secondly, both articulated a humanising political vision grounded in dignity, justice and the restoration of the oppressed. Mandela's emphasis on reconciliation and nation-building, and Rizal's advocacy for education, reform and moral awakening, reflect trajectories aimed at restoring the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressor (Francia 2014; Mandela 1994). Thirdly, their movements followed non-totalitarian trajectories. While both engaged structures of resistance, their visions did not culminate in authoritarian state formation, ideological absolutism or mass repression – features commonly associated with violent revolutionary regimes (Tutu 1999). Fourthly, both demonstrated ethical restraint in the use of power. Mandela's shift from armed resistance to negotiated reconciliation and Rizal's sustained commitment to peaceful reform illustrate moral limits placed on political action even within liberation struggles (De Gruchy 2002; Morris 2003). Finally, their enduring moral legacy continues to inspire global discourses on justice, human rights, education and reconciliation, extending beyond their immediate national contexts (Boesak 2017; Wirth 2023).

Hence, the liberative motifs of Nelson Mandela and José Rizal offer valuable lessons for contemporary efforts towards justice and equality, and align deeply with the mission of the Church, which is to participate in God's work of holistic liberation. The Church, as a community of faith, is called to embody Christ's liberative mission (*missio Dei*) and to address the spiritual, social and economic dimensions of

human existence. Mandela's emphasis on reconciliation and Rizal's focus on education and moral reform remind the Church of its role in promoting healing, empowerment and the pursuit of justice. Their lives challenge the Church to confront systemic injustices, advocate for the marginalised and work towards the flourishing of all creation.

In the contemporary world, where inequality, poverty and oppression persist, the lives of Mandela and Rizal serve as a call to action. Their visionary leadership and sacrificial commitment inspire individuals and communities to take up the unfinished work of liberation.

At the same time, their shortcomings remind the Church and society of the need for a more comprehensive approach – one that addresses not only political and intellectual liberation but also the structural and economic dimensions of injustice. By integrating these lessons into its mission, the Church can continue to be a beacon of hope, partnering with others to restore human dignity and create a just and equitable world. In this way, the lives of Mandela and Rizal remain deeply relevant, encouraging today's generation to embrace their legacy and actively contribute to the ongoing mission of holistic liberation.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Thinandavha D. Mashau: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Fides Del Castillo: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Disclaimer

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

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