

Towards an African Liberationist Queer Theological Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the only adequate theological frame within which we do queer theology and construct a queer theological pedagogy in Africa is an African liberation ideo-theological frame. This article delineates the various distinctive features of such a frame, and then offers some reflections on the constraints within African contexts that mitigate against this task.

Dedication

I dedicate this paper to Eudy Simelane (11 March 1977-28 April 2008), Banyana Banyana footballer and LGBTI activist, who was raped and murdered in her home town of KwaThema in Gauteng, South Africa. May she rest in peace, and may we not rest while the struggle for LGBTI justice continues.

Introduction

I have chosen this rather cumbersome title because it captures the complexity of the project that lies before us as African theological educators, if we are to take up the contextual challenge of sexual diversity and the rampant marginalisation of different or queer sexualities. I have chosen to use a 'manifesto' style for this article, endeavouring to convey the urgency (and the militancy) such work requires. I begin with the theoretical and methodological contours of this pedagogical project and then conclude with some of the challenges facing us.

An Epistemological Privilege

The only adequate African theological frame that is able to incorporate (in the full sense of this term) a queer theological pedagogy is an African liberation perspective. The core element among the cluster of elements that constitute a

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theology of liberation is, according to the self-constituted dialogue of Third World theologians working together in forums such as EATWOT (the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), the epistemological privilege of the marginalised sector that is the subject of the theological project.¹ Such a privileging includes more than an ethical commitment to this sector; it requires privileging what this sector knows and how they know.

Implicit in this understanding of the epistemological privilege of a particular marginalised sector is that this epistemology is communal. It is the product of the dignity-driven processes of the organisation and mobilisation of that marginalised sector itself.²

The socially-engaged biblical scholar or theologian is either organic to this sector or is summoned by this organised sector to do theology with them, enabling their ‘people’s theology’ to become a ‘prophetic theology’.³ For this to happen, for the African biblical scholar or theologian to be summoned by this sector, they must ‘already’ be among them, working with them for social transformation, whether organic to or in solidarity with. The ‘doing’ of prophetic theology is a second phase; the first phase is actual social struggle.⁴

This requires in this case African biblical scholars and theologians working with organised groups of LGBTI people, in whatever constellations these ‘different’ marginalised sexualities constitute themselves across the LGBTI (and Q) spectrum.

However, it is not sufficient to imagine that it is only the middle-class intellectuals from these constellations who ‘can speak’. Subaltern sectors can speak,⁵ but require the safe and sequestered sites middle-class urban intellectuals

1 Per Frostin, “The Hermeneutics of the Poor: The Epistemological ‘Break’ in Third World Theologies”, *Studia Theologica* 39 no. 2 (1985), 127-150; *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988); Gerald O. West, “Liberation Hermeneutics”, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Steven L. McKenzie, 507-515 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2 Gerald O. West, “Contending for Dignity in the Bible and the Post-Apartheid South African Public Realm”, in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity*, edited by L. Juliana Claassens and Bruce C. Birch, 101-124 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

3 Kairos, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, rev. 2nd ed. (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986), 34-35, note 15; Albert Nolan, “Work, the Bible, Workers, and Theologians: Elements of a Workers’ Theology”, *Semeia* 73 (1996), 213-220.

4 Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

5 While I recognise that Gayatri Spivak is engaging with quite complex notions of representation, I worry that the question she asks is asked of the subaltern and not the middle-class intellectual, for the same concerns about representation could be put to this sector; see Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Gary Nelson and L. Grossberg,

take for granted.⁶ Organised groups ought to be cross-sectoral, in terms of class (and perhaps other ‘identity’ constructs as well, such as ethnicity), if the struggle for queer justice is to reach beyond the terrain of middle-class urban realities. Not only does this inclusion draw on a range of epistemologies, it also assists the socially-engaged scholar from succumbing to queer methodologies becoming just one more technique in the scholar’s repertoire of trendy techniques.

The African context provides multiple sites of engagement and participation in this struggle, confronted as we are with a political struggle, a legal struggle, a cultural struggle, a religious struggle, among other sites of struggle. Fortunately, the legal and political struggle offer considerable scope for organising in the South African context, and it is important to recognise and mobilise on the basis of what has been accomplished at this level.⁷

This means that our theological pedagogy begins outside the classroom, and that we must then construct a permeable boundary between this community and the classroom. Our theological institutions must become safe places for the inclusion of LGBTI sectors, openly including LGBTI students and carefully constructing relationships with organised formations outside of our institutions. We have to model for our theological students the methodologies that facilitate reading the Bible and doing theology ‘with’ marginalised sectors outside the academy.⁸ We cannot perpetuate, pedagogically, the ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary that characterises so much of our discourse around sexual diversity.

From People’s Theology to Prophetic Theology to Prophetic Pedagogy

Privileging the social and theological experience and analysis of the LGBTI community requires, of course, that African biblical scholars and theologians cannot do queer theology without the direct participation of ordinary queer people. This needs to be reiterated. Reading the Bible and doing theology ‘with’ ordinary people is not a methodological option, it is constitutive of the very processes and products of a prophetic queer theology, and a related prophetic queer pedagogy.⁹

271-313 (London: Macmillan, 1988).

- 6 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 7 Marian Burchardt, “Equals before the Law? Public Religion and Queer Activism in the Age of Judicial Politics in South Africa”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 43 (2013), 237-260.
- 8 Gerald O. West, “Beyond the ‘Critical’ Curtain: Community-Based Service Learning in an African Context”, *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7, no. 2 (2004), 71-82.
- 9 “Reading Other-Wise: Re-Envisaging the Reading Practices and Place of the Socially Engaged Biblical Scholar”, *Scriptura* 68 (1999), 49-66. But see Sarojini Nadar, “Beyond the ‘Ordinary Reader’ and

So while we might and should draw on queer theological resources from other contextual sites,¹⁰ our own African contexts must be privileged.

Pedagogically, this requires us modelling to our students ‘how’ theology is done in African contexts, a praxis that moves from people’s theology to prophetic theology to prophetic pedagogy,¹¹ as we train another generation to work for social transformation.

Other African Liberation Theologies

More important than our dialogue with queer theological resources from other contextual sites is our recognition of the intersections between the struggles of the LGBTI community and the struggles that have generated other African liberation theologies: African inculturation, black, feminist, post-colonial, HIV and (emerging) disability theologies. African queer theology and queer pedagogy must not become an ‘adjectival’, ‘add-on’ theology.

Not only are there organic links between the marginalised sectors that have generated these different but intersecting liberation theologies, the methodologies of these various liberation theologies also have substantial capacity for work with the LGBTI community.¹² However, we should be careful in choosing our allies. We should remember that South Africa remains largely a country of conservative ‘Church Theology’, ‘who worry that humanistic concerns have raced too far ahead of the people. This has been the case especially’, writes Daniel Magaziner in his book on ‘Black Consciousness in South Africa’, ‘on the issue of same-sex marriage—a right implied by the South African Constitution, upheld by the country’s Parliament, but still hotly debated’.¹³ To illustrate his final caution,

the ‘Invisible Intellectual’: Shifting Contextual Bible Study from Liberation Discourse to Liberation Pedagogy”, *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 2 (2009), 384-403; “‘Hermeneutics of Transformation?’ A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities”, in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, edited by Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi and Dora Mbuwayesango, 389-406 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

- 10 Ken Stone, ed. *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).
- 11 Kairos, *The Kairos Document*, 34-35, note 15; Nolan, “Work, the Bible, Workers, and Theologians”; James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Gerald O. West, “Articulating, Owning and Mainstreaming Local Theologies: The Contribution of Contextual Bible Study”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 122 (2005), 23-35; “Contending for Dignity in the Bible and the Post-Apartheid South African Public Realm”.
- 12 See for example Jeremy Punt, “Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Biblical Interpretation”, in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, *Semeia Studies*, 321-341 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).
- 13 Daniel R. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens and Johannesburg: Ohio University Press, 2010), 189.

Magaziner cites the example of Manas Buthelezi, who was among those who ‘helped to develop the theology that, by the 1980s, saw a multiracial group of South African church people sign that Kairos Document, which publicly repudiated the state and declared apartheid a “heresy”’.¹⁴ Recently, in an open letter to his member of Parliament, Buthelezi wrote: ‘I am afraid that [a] time is coming that same sex marriages will be declared a heresy, the same way as Apartheid was’.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the dangers of working within the intersections of the different forms of Africa’s liberation theologies, connecting with these diverse forms of African theology enables us to recognise the intersecting structural or systemic dimensions of marginalisation.¹⁶ The indivisibility of justice lies at the very heart of an African liberationist queer pedagogy.

However, having said this, just as each of the other African liberation theologies has required and so forged its own particular methodological tools, so too we must facilitate methodological space for the innovation that the particularity of this struggle demands.

We will also have to be prepared to follow queer theology across the boundary of what is considered ‘decent’ in African contexts. The more established forms of African ‘liberation’ theologies all struggle with intersecting with the queer. Queer theology is an ‘indecent’ theology.¹⁷ African queer theology and queer pedagogy will have to grapple, for example, with the economic dimensions of sex and sexuality, including both ‘decent’ and ‘indecent’ sex-work.¹⁸ African queer theology and queer pedagogy will also have to trouble African culture, enabling the culturally indecent dimensions of culture to be understood as ‘African’.

Queer Particularity and the Tradition

So far I have followed the convention of linking the diverse sexualities that constitute LGBTI, but I prefer the term ‘queer’, both because it includes more diversity and more particularity than LGBTI and because it adopts an ideological ‘attitude’.

‘Queer’ is also used as both a noun and verb, and this leads me to my next point. Queer reality, the lived reality of the LGBTI community, must ‘queer(y)’ the Christian tradition, both the biblical and theological traditions. Just as we bring

14 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 189.

15 Cited in Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 189.

16 Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, “HIV and AIDS-Related Stigma and Discrimination: A Conceptual Framework and Implications for Action”, *Social Science & Medicine* 57 (2003), 13-24.

17 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

18 Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible* (London: Equinox, 2009).

other African marginalised realities into dialogue with the biblical and theological traditions, so too queer realities must take their interrogative stance alongside our other marginalised realities.

Indeed, a prophetic queer theology and pedagogy locates marginalised sexualities as the 'subject' of the African theological curriculum, for our contexts do not allow us the distinction between 'Theology' with an upper-case 'T' and 'applied' 'theologies' with a lower-case 't'. All African theology is contextual theology, and queer contexts are constitutive of our African contexts.

Contending Tradition

A prophetic queer theology and pedagogy will require of us the recognition that the biblical and theological traditions are themselves contested. The Bible does not speak with one voice, and neither do our various theological traditions, even though there is the tendency in African theologies to imagine and present them as if they do.

If we claim that the Bible stands with the LGBTI community in an unambiguous way, the Bible will remain a problem in the struggle for justice for this community of struggle.¹⁹ South African black theology is the clearest of the African theologies about the contested nature of the biblical tradition,²⁰ but African feminist and African post-colonial theologies too have grappled with a biblical text that is both 'a problem and solution'.²¹ Indeed, we might argue that these African theologies have demonstrated that 'conversation', 'dialogue', 'contestation' and 'struggle' are part of the message of sacred scripture.

An African queer theology and pedagogy will have to do the same, and once again we will have to allow our students 'to hear' the different and often discordant voices within and across biblical texts. And similar work will have to be done with our theological traditions, both those that are 'Settler-initiated' and those that are 'African-initiated'.

19 Gerald O. West, "Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy", *Scriptura* 86 (2004), 160-173.

20 Takatso Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation", *Journal of Black Theology* 2 (1988), 34-42; Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology*; Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "The Bible among African Christians: A Missiological Perspective", in *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today's Multicultural Global Context*, edited by Teresa Okure, 87-112 (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000).

21 Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); Makhosazana K. Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel: A Postcolonial *Imbokodo* Reading of the Story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16)", in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning*, edited by Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2008), 223-258.

Sites of Struggle

'Mainstreaming'²² queer pedagogy will not be easy in many African theological contexts. Each of the elements I have discussed in this article are part of our theological praxis in the School for Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, yet even here the extension of our methodologies to the sexual terrain has been actively contested.

Among the many challenges I will draw attention to in this final section of the paper, the following five are the most important: confronting African evangelicalism, establishing ecumenical theological space, understanding the effects of globalisation, constructing liberatory interfaith collaboration and intersecting sexuality with other African sites of struggle.

First, the predominant and prevailing theological tradition across much of the African continent are forms of neo-evangelicalism.²³ This theology is individualistic, authoritarian and moralistic, and holds to a mono-vocal Bible, a Bible that speaks with a single clear voice about any issue. Each of these characteristics mitigates against its capacity to engage in a prophetic queer theology and pedagogy. The challenge here is to construct a systemic-liberationist theological perspective, such as that found in the 'Elimina Statement'.²⁴ In the shadow of Elmina Castle on the Ghana coast, a 'Statement' was forged that offers a shift in how we might engage with issues of sexuality on the African continent. The 'Statement' is, in my view, the beginning of a theological shift in our African discourse, and so a kind of *kairos* moment. Theology around sexuality has tended to be focussed on the individual, using either the resources of evangelical 'moral' theology or the resources of liberal 'human rights' theology. While these theologies may offer us some resources, they remain resolutely individual in their focus. What the 'Elmina Statement' does is to move beyond the individual to the systems that marginalise certain sexualities. The 'Statement' is *kairos*-like not only for this shift in theological orientation. It is *kairos*-like in that it is the product of a long process of cross-sectoral consultation in which the voices of marginalised sexualities have been central. It is only a small beginning, but both in terms of process and shape it is a significant beginning.

22 West, "Articulating, Owning and Mainstreaming Local Theologies".

23 Ogbu U. Kalu, "African Christianity: An Overview", in *African Christianity: An African Story*, edited by Ogbu U. Kalu (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 24-42; Paul Gifford, "Trajectories in African Christianity", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8, no. 4 (2008), 275-289.

24 See Sexuality Consultation, "Elmina Statement", (2015), <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/RESOURCES_OF_UJAMAA/Sexualityconsultation.aspx>; "Elmina Consultation Statement (2015)", in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Africa*, edited by Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 199-200.

Second, most African theological institutions are controlled by neo-evangelical forms of theology, drawing on both indigenous African and Euro-American missionary resources, shutting down the safe space necessary to forge an African queer theology and pedagogy. The challenge here is to form ‘theological clusters’, such as the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions,²⁵ within which seminaries can enter into partnerships with university theological programmes where there is less institutional constraint on what is done theologically and how it is done.

Third, economic and cultural globalisation is creating a deep sense of dis-ease across African communities (especially within African patriarchies), and among the responses to this unease is an impulse ‘to return’ to consolidatory²⁶ and conservative religio-cultural systems. The gender-sexuality nexus is the target at the centre of this controlling trend.²⁷ The challenge here is to forge African theological methodologies that recover and reconstruct particular dimensions of African religio-cultural systems while also integrating resources into these methodologies for a liberative deconstruction of the death-dealing dimensions of African religio-cultural systems. The Ujamaa theology of Tanzania may provide a model for such work.²⁸

Fourth, our previously prophetic ecumenical structures have turned from a context-led ecumenism to neo-orthodoxy as the defining feature of ‘ecumenical’ connectedness, shutting down ecumenical space for a queer theological project that does anything more than broach the topic in polite and ineffectual (theological) terms. The challenge here is to locate theological education among queer marginalised sectors, enabling a *kairos*-like process of ‘people’s theology’ becoming a new ‘prophetic theology’.

Fifth, African Christian communities are more worried about appearing ‘orthodox’ to their Islamic and African Traditional Religion neighbours than they are about including LGBTI Christians. Instead of forging an interfaith liberatory praxis that is grounded in context rather than the religious tradition (as the first ‘theological’ moment), our African churches, mosques, temples and indigenous sacred places have chosen to defend neo-orthodox representations of their religious

25 Gerald O. West, “The School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics: Doing Contextual Theology in Africa in the University of KwaZulu-Natal”, in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2013), 919-926.

26 Walter Brueggemann, “A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation”, in Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, edited by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1-21; “Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel”, in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, edited by Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 201-226.

27 Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

28 Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa*.

traditions. The challenge here is to allow the context of marginalised sexual orientations to become the site of interfaith liberatory praxis, where context (as a primary reality) is foregrounded at first rather than religious identity, and then only, as second moment, is a particular religion called to offer liberative resources to this context.²⁹

Sixth, there is a tendency in African theologies to sustain a dichotomy between ‘theologies of body’ and ‘theologies of bread’.³⁰ Economic realities, it can be argued, are the foundational realities of liberation theology, in both its Latin American and Black African manifestations,³¹ yet African inculturation, feminist and post-colonial theologies have found it difficult to engage with the economic terrain.³² The challenge here, as already indicated, is that an African queer theology and pedagogy will have to intersect with African economic realities. ‘Intersectionality’ is vital,³³ but it must be an intersectionality in which class is a key component of any identity-driven theology.

Given these obstacles, and I have enumerated only a few, we may have to locate our African liberationist queer pedagogy ‘outside’ of formal theological, ecclesiastical and ecumenical structures, on the margins. Yet this is where socially-engaged theologians ought to already be, and so such a place will be a strange site within which to do our work. What is vital to a queer pedagogy is to forge the kind of safe and sacred sites where this work can be done without having to argue for or defend a queer starting point.

29 Matthew C. Palombo, “Interfaith Praxis in South African Struggle for Liberation: Toward a Liberation-Political Framework for Muslim-Christian Relations” (D.Litt et Phil. thesis, University of Johannesburg, 2014).

30 Anthony Balcomb, “From Liberation to Democracy: Theologies of Bread and Being in the New South Africa”, *Missionalia* 26 (1998), 54-73.

31 Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology*.

32 But see Musa W. Dube, “Looking Back and Forward: Postcolonialism, Globalization, God and Gender”, *Scriptura* 92 (2006), 178-193.

33 For numerous forms of intersectionality in African contexts, see Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken, eds., *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016); Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, eds., *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016).