

# The tone of Black Theology debates towards democratic dispensation in South Africa: 1985–1994

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The tone of the Black Theology debates took different forms depending on the relevant political processes and dispensations in which they were debated. This situation played itself out in South Africa over the years, from the introduction of Black Theology in the late 1960s to the introduction of the democratic order in 1994. The changing socio-political context in South Africa over the years determined the shape or tone of these debates. This article examines the history of Black Theology debates in South Africa, covering the almost 10-year period between 1985 and 1994. The nature of the debate took a different turn during this period than before and after. The author will therefore highlight the political climate in South Africa that shaped the debates, examine the genesis of Black Theology and historically examine the debate about it over the period under review. Ultimately, a path forward should be developed. The study draws on existing literature through a qualitative review method for carrying out this project.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article examines the tone of Black Theology debates between 1985 and 1994 towards the transition to democracy in South Africa. Although it is located in the field of missiology, it also has interdisciplinary implications for disciplines such as history, sociology and practical theology.

**Keywords:** Black Theology; African; debates; black consciousness; black theologians; South Africa.

## Introduction

[C]hanging contexts call for shifting approaches to understanding and engaging contexts and, therefore, how theology is done. The theologies of liberation have undergone significant change as the social contexts they wished to address have changed. The same could be said for theologies focusing on cultural identity ... So changing contexts will always call forth new efforts in contextual theology. (Irvin, Phan & Bevans 2018:71)

South Africa (SA) became the setting for Black Theology, and over the years, the debates around this theology evolved. This development was dictated by changing political climates. One could divide this into three eras: the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, the mid-1970s to mid-1980s and the third, which this article will focus on, being the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. This phase is described by Maimela (Molobi 2010:8) as the most decisive in the struggle for liberation and theology in SA. From the mid-1980s, there was a rise in resistance, dominated by African National Congress (ANC) politics, ending in the mid-1990s with a democratic government and subsequent declarations in some quarters, for instance, as observed by (Molobi 2000:16) that Black Theology was dead.

The dynamic political climate in SA, which also developed over the years, determined the nature of the debates around this theology. This theology paralleled and was influenced by the changing political scenarios. Following this paradigm, this study will examine the history of the debate surrounding Black Theology in the above-mentioned period. As part of this project, the author will outline the political dynamics of this period, the emergence of this theology and examine the nature of the debate that took place around it. Finally, the author will develop suggestions for a way forward. As far as methodology is concerned, literature study will be foregrounded. This will include books and journals focusing on Black Theology debates during the period under review.

## The political climate in South Africa during the mid-1980s and mid-1990s

The mid-eighties of the previous century in SA marked the high point of the struggle against apartheid in SA. It was the time when everything was conceived in terms of the 'total onslaught' of the liberation

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movement against the illegitimate state, and the 'total strategy' of the state to overcome the 'terrorist' onslaught. (Saayman 2009:12)

Saayman has correctly grasped the political climate of the era. Interrogating this political phase is important to understand the dynamics of the debate that followed. The political temperatures of that decade influenced the tone of the debate.

During this period, state repression intensified, as evidenced by two states of emergency. The first was introduced in parts of the Transvaal and Eastern Cape in 1985. According to Dubow (2000:90), there was a massive crackdown by the security forces. The second state of emergency was declared in 1986. The powers given to the security forces came with the wrath of unspeakable torture. For instance, 'Torture became widespread as over 24000 people were detained in the second half of 1986' (Ellis & Sechaba 1992:163).

Victims of oppression also reacted accordingly as exemplified by an international arms embargo in the mid-1980s (Maquire 1991:27). Townships became battlefields as was seen from the fact that apart from Soweto, Ellis and Sechaba (1992:143) indicated that 'in September 1984, the Vaal townships exploded into unrest. Crowds went out into the streets demonstrating and throwing stones and were met by the police with their usual brutality'. There was exodus to other countries as confirmed by Dubow (2000:82) who stated that, '... as many as four to five thousand students, hardened by urban warfare and inspired by revolutionary enthusiasm, fled South Africa'.

This political activism led the government to relax some repressive rules in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, the law on mixed marriages and the so-called immorality law were repealed. On 05 January 1985, Mr Botha announced the government's intention to give black people more rights. Consequently, those who lived outside their 'homeland' received property rights. Reforms, release of political prisoners, return of political exiles and negotiations continued into the 1990s.

These reform programmes 'frustrated' the protagonists of Black Theology as they were unexpected. This could be seen from Balcomb (2005:482) who acknowledged that in February 1990 after the announcement of the release of political prisoners, the churches asked: 'What do we do now?'. The frustration suffered by Black Theology was also felt by African Christianity. Maluleke (1998b:333) reflected on the role of African Christianity after democracy in 1994 and noted that the changing role of African Christianity was not clear given the new political order in SA.

## The genesis of Black Theology in South Africa

Lamola (1989:2) locates the emergence of Black Theology in SA between 1968 and 1971. The term Black Theology first

appeared in SA in an essay by Dr Basil Moore entitled 'Towards a Black Theology' read during a University Christian Movement (UCM) formation at Thaba Nchu in March 1970. Black Theology of the USA was applied to the South African context. This paper led to the creation of a Black Theology project in late 1970 (Kritzinger 1988:58). Before the 1970s, there was no significant political mobilisation among churches in SA. However, black protest existed long before the 1970s although the term Black Theology was not yet in the picture. The African Initiated Churches (AICs) are an example of this (p. 57). From 1976 through the 1980s, action by churches, particularly among black Christians and clergy, was noticeable as they joined liberation movements in large numbers. This was made possible by pastors trained in the early 1970s at seminaries such as the Lutheran Theological College in Umphumulo, the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice and the St. Peters Seminary in Hammanskraal, which were influenced by black consciousness (Denis 2010:162ff).

Reddie (2014:1) attempts to clarify the location of the terms 'Black Theology' and 'black liberation theology'. He argued that using the terms 'liberation' and 'black' together was a tautology because both express liberation. He argues that Black Theology represents the theme of liberation. He projects Black Theology as prophetic, liberation-oriented, angry, polemical and passionate (p. 1). Cone and West (2018) argue that the focus of Black Theology:

[M]ust take seriously the reality of black people – their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk that seeks to be black-talk. When that man is black and lives in a society permeated with white racist power, he can speak of God only from the perspective of the socio-economic and political conditions unique to black people. (p. 78)

## The shape of the Black Theology debate: Mid-1980s to mid-1990s

By the end of the 1980s, nearly all of these countries had returned to some form of democratic rule...Apartheid ended in South Africa in 1994. While poverty and forms of social oppression still remained, the loss of such concrete objects of resistance made maintaining the struggle in its original form more difficult. In the grassroots communities that in many countries had been powerful sources of resistance, people turned their attention from political struggle to other ways of bettering their lot. (Irvin et al. 2018:69)

The changing socio-political context in SA shaped the trajectory of Black Theology praxis and debates. Balcomb (2005) correctly captured this process:

The 'magna carta' of prophetic theology in the early eighties was the Kairos document. Its analysis was simple. There was a left, a right and a centre in theological alignment. 'Prophetic' theology was on the left, 'state' theology on the right and 'church' theology in the middle. The signs of the times were clear: To be prophetic, you needed to be aligned with the forces of the revolution on the left. To occupy any other position was to 'sell out' to the regime. Twenty years later, regime change has meant that the same architects of Kairos have found themselves in the centre, by their

own definition 'sold out', through the processes of history, to a new, albeit vastly changed, status quo. (p. 485)

The mid-1980s marked the zenith of apartheid. Referring to it, Maimela (1987:64) lamented, 'Black people continue to suffer oppression and various forms of deprivation, which stretch from the first encounter between Whites and Blacks to the present time'. He further pointed out that racial domination has been perfected and become more effective over the years. Apartheid responded by declaring a state of emergency on 20 July 1985. Mofokeng (1987:21) commenting about it echoed: there is no doubt any more that there is a great measure of intransigence and desperation on the part of the white state. Large scale indiscriminate detentions of black leaders and activists of all ages, the tear-gassing of people in churches and at funeral services and the brutal shootings of unarmed school children provide irrefutable concrete evidence of this intransigence and desperation. This shaped the context of Black Theology during this period. It was during this period that the Kairos document was conceived and birthed as a Black Theology response.

At the start of this period, Mosala (1987:34) located the focus of Black Theology being 'an economically, politically, culturally and morally dispossessed people'. God is seen as the God of the oppressed siding with the poor (Walker 2004:38). For Motlhabi (2005:9), the focus 'was liberation – not only spiritual liberation in the form of traditional, otherworldly "salvation" often preached by the church, but also liberation from physical, psychological, socio-political, economic and cultural oppression'.

The contextual praxis of Black Theology before, during and after this period changed. The highly explosive political situation at the beginning of this period ended with a democratic government in the mid-1990s. For example, a state of emergency was declared in 1985, followed by the creation of the Kairos Document. In 1986, the Belhar confession was accepted. This changing context was captured by Mofokeng (1987:31): 'the racist oppression and capitalist dispossession of blacks in South Africa has always undergone a historical development and manifested it differently during different historical periods'.

The debate during this period questioned the impact of Black Theology in the light of harsh state attacks through states of emergency and the associated brutality. Mofokeng (1987) was among the first to act when he stated:

It is not certain anymore that old theological language and communal activity will continue to be the best ways of expressing the presence of God among the oppressed in the most effective manner in and beyond the present state of emergency. (p. 21)

The ethics of a suitable hermeneutic also formed part of the debate. For instance, Mosala (Mofokeng 1987) called for:

[A] new way of going about with the biblical text, away that will enable the hidden and silenced but struggling oppressed people in biblical communities to become visible, and to break their silence and speak up clearly and loud enough to be heard by the

equally silenced black people today as they stand up to demand God's justice and liberation. (p. 27)

He saw this as an epistemological moment that should enable black theologians to build effective theological praxis for the black working masses. Maluleke (1996:11) highlighted how black theologians like Mosala were concerned about why Black Theology was not a theoretical weapon of the oppressed in SA, identifying the problem in the equation of the Bible with the Word of God. This makes the Bible both a historical and a harmonious book with a message that fits all situations in which he argued that it was wrong because it was pro-humanist but anti-working class. This view of the Bible has been used as a means to question the validity of both African Christianity and African theology. He noted that there is no adequate reaction on this. He, however, also appreciated the fact that black theologians are slowly reading the scriptures in the light of the black working people as what he calls their 'organic intellectuals' (p. 27). He also acknowledges that at least what he referred to as, 'dynamite that lies hidden in the bowels of the scriptural text' will ultimately bear fruits.

The issues of gender were also discussed as among others could be seen from Mofokeng (1987) who lamented their neglect and advocated for a redefinition of the black community's identity in which women's oppression and struggles are recognised. He argued:

All attention had up to that point focussed entirely on national issues in which black people as a group stand over and against white people, white economy and the white state, many black women especially at a time when they too were in the forefront of the battle facing the wrath of the army and the police and suffering equally if not more, demanded the issue of their subservient position during times of relative peace to be addressed. (p. 25)

Motlhabi (2005:13) also acknowledged that Black Theology's initial focus was on racism, but at this time it also included gender, which needed to be tackled on equal proportion with racism.

The debate also included what they called black culture. Mofokeng (1987:29) argued that while there was agreement from the onset that all the oppressed in SA were the black people, who were Africans, Coloureds and Indians, there was no homogeneity of their culture. He lamented the fact that what he called black culture, black history and African traditional religion were not included as formative factors in Black Theology. Mofokeng (1987:29) showed that 'Buthelezi explicitly and emphatically talked about the culture of blacks having been totally destroyed'.

The AICs also came into focus. Although the AICs were initially considered silent on issues of sociopolitical justice, black theologians during this period recognised some value. For instance, Mofokeng (1987) stated:

Notwithstanding persistent criticism of these churches' intolerable neutrality which is tantamount to support of the racist state, there is an increasing understanding among a

significant number of black theologians of these churches and appreciation of their positive role in enabling the lowest in the black community to at least absorb the sting of oppression and survive. (p. 30)

The importance of the AICs in social change began to be appreciated. This could be seen, among others, from Masuku (1996) who entitled his article, *African Initiated Churches: Christian partners or antagonists?* in which he demonstrated the importance of the AICs. Molobi and Saayman (2006:328) also observed their positive aspects when they stated: 'the AICs acted on an undeniable liberatory impulse, formed part of an early expression of religious as well as political protest against the imposition of white rule'. Vellem's positive view towards the AICs emanated from this period when he considered them (Masuku 2021):

[A]s those who can play an important role in reconstructing, promoting and securing the 'free dispensation of moral and ethical thought that shaped the lives of the black African people' from the terror and destruction of the Western empire. (p. 1)

The question of how to implement African theology in questions of social justice was also examined. The main pillars of difference with Black Theology were African culture, history and traditional religions to the exclusion of social justice issues. Black theologians therefore agreed with Cone that African theology is impoverished by neglecting sociopolitical issues (Mofokeng 1987:30). They affirmed African culture, history and traditional religions as defining factors of African theology. In order to eliminate the negative elements and generate positivity, Mofokeng (1987:30) claims that some black theologians have begun to consistently apply class analysis. This development occurs despite the understanding of the weakness of Marxism in questions of culture and religion. Mosala advised that Black Theology should 'identify the distinctive forms of working class culture and use them as a basis for developing theological strategies of liberation' (Mofokeng 1987:30). Mofokeng (1987) called for the investigation of cultural history of the struggling classes and learn from it:

[W]e should follow our own path and critically appropriate only those elements which appeal to and sustain the black poor and most powerless in their struggle for survival. These we should consider incorporating in black theology. (p. 31)

Motlhabi (2005:10) also acknowledged that there are no longer any glaring differences between them and that they have room for interaction and cooperation. He appreciated the fruits of this process as the creation of an African liberation theology that began to emerge from around 1993.

The matter of Pan-Africanism in theology was also foregrounded. Initially, areas of division among them were threefold: culture, history and traditional religion, which all lacked social justice. During this period, division was appreciated as, 'Pan African dialogue, co-operation and unification of black people in the world' (Mofokeng 1987:30). Pan-Africanism in theology was enhanced by the combination of African culture and the injection of what Mofokeng (p. 30)

coined, 'politico-economic commitment on the African continent', which can trigger some prospects for improvement towards Pan-Africanism in theology. Through Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who embodied the combination of African culture and politico-economic commitment, Pan-Africanism in theology made some positive tractions (p. 30).

The apartheid reform programme also sparked debate. This could be seen in the ranks of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which gave birth to Black Theology. The relationship of BCM to Black Theology and its influence on it were clear from these three arguments. Firstly, according to Mofokeng (1987:22), it was seen as a theological articulation of Black Consciousness in the field of religion; secondly, Biko challenged and invited the Church, particularly the black Church, to '... construct a Black theology of liberation' and thirdly, Mtshiselwa (2016) also agreed that 'black liberation theology is inseparable from the philosophy of black consciousness'. Black Consciousness Movement rejected the negotiation initiatives with the apartheid regime. Moodley (1990) pointed out that the unity of the oppressed should be a prerequisite for the dismantling of the apartheid regime. He thus echoed:

[W]e must work towards a position where we seek the transference of power. De Klerk and his regime must resign. White people must accept that they are individuals who cannot retain special favours. They can no longer operate as a group with power in their hands. (p. 19)

The debate also included the meaning of suffering and exodus, which Volf (2006:111) called the memory of exodus and passion. Mofokeng (1987:33) lamented the fact that the cross continued to hang heavily over the oppressed since 1976. He thus underlined callous rapes, shootings, heinous forms of torture and genocidal murders as black experiences and linked them to the sufferings and death of Jesus, whom he called a black messiah. The alignment of Jesus with these sufferings carries a message of hope. This comparison of Jesus' suffering to the oppressed was also made by Maluleke (2000) in his article entitled: *The Crucified Reflected in Africa's Cross Bearers*, highlighting the '...emphasis on affinity between Jesus and ordinary Africans' (p. 85). The relationship between the Cross and Exodus and the future is important as a comfort to the oppressed in light of the promise enacted. Regarding Exodus, Volf (2006:112) argues that God, who delivered Israel of the past, will also deliver Israel of the future. He also holds that what happened to Christ happened to all of humanity. Thus, part of the future promised world has already entered this sinful world. Küng (1981:59–70) referred to this as 'a futuristic-presentist eschatology'. He touches on the future eschaton breaking into the present world.

The difference between Black Theology and European theologies was also highlighted. They found that Western theologians are being manipulative. However, they accepted some of the blame for not emphasising the difference between their theology and other theologies and for continuing to use dominant theological categories. Mofokeng (1987) identified the core problem when he referred to:

[W]hite theologians who wrongly attempted to link Black Theology with some European theologies in order to acquire the right of placing it on their agenda in the arena of their struggle for orthodoxy. (p. 22)

At the beginning of the 1990s, there was a completely unexpected turn in the political wheel. Balcomb (2005:482) noted how they were shaken by Mr de Klerk's announcement of the unexpected release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990. He saw this as marking the beginning of a crisis in prophetic theology, hence:

The announcement was greeted with a stunned silence. Someone broke the silence with the words 'What do we do now?' It was as though we had already, in that brief moment, seen the writing on the wall for prophetic theology, and we did not like what we saw. Like Jonah, we had preached to Nineveh – never believing it would repent, and we did not like it when we were proven wrong. (p. 482)

While the above quote indicates the frustration with regards to the future of Black Theology, Maluleke (2008a) advised:

[W]e now need similar but new tools to analyse the role of religion in the post-colony called South Africa, often misnamed a young democracy. A post-colony is still a colony. We find ourselves in a situation in which the colony continues even after the colonial period. (p. 124)

Motlhabi (2005) added:

The false impression given by this trend is that we have now arrived at freedom square; we can now relax and concentrate on other things. Nothing, indeed, can be farther from the truth. (p. 18)

Moore (2018:94) presented good guidelines regarding the role of Black Theology in politically changing SA. He advised that the focus of the struggle in SA today has changed from liberation from systematic structured racist oppression to social justice in pursuit of an equal society. The focus needs to be on the victims of poverty and engaging with them in their struggle for liberation and listening to their needs.

This period also provided an opportunity to interrogate Black Theology's influence on the activism of black theologians. Two camps were identified. Firstly, those whose level of fighting has not decreased over the years. Chikane (Moore 2018:92), who was interviewed by Moore in 1992 to reflect on the impact of Black Theology on his ministry, revealed important points that may point to other black theologians. Still, he confirmed that he was a black theologian at heart. He further acknowledged that this theology has always provided him with the tools through which to reflect and direct his practical struggles. He understood that these struggles were always connected to other black people for liberation. He judged this to be the most fundamental feature of this theology. At this time, he still understood this theology as the fight of black people against oppression and for freedom. Through this testimony, the objective of Black Theology, which was to '... enable black clergy and black Christians to engage in the political struggle for liberation as Christians', still reverberates during this period of changing

political climate in SA (p. 93). Motlhabi (2005) is therefore correct to conclude:

One can state categorically that earlier generations of black theologians – those theologians who were exposed to black theology in the first two decades of its appearance – benefited immensely from its teaching and method. (p. 18)

Secondly, those whom Motlhabi describes as the younger generation of religious leaders and on whom he doubts that Black Theology has had any influence. The fact that there were rumours that Black Theology was dead as early as the mid-1980s says a lot. So, he shouted: 'Will the true remaining black theologians in this country please stand – and show their fruits!'

The theology of reconstruction also emerged. The tone of the language changed. Maluleke (1994:245) stated that terms such as, struggle, revolution and liberation were challenged by new ideas of reconstruction, development and democracy that formed an integral part of the language of South African politics. He argued that these were triggered by Mr De Klerk's reform initiatives in 1990. He thus argues:

In the eyes of many South Africans, it seems that between late 1989 and early 1990 one political epoch came to an end and another was born. In reality, the shift has been less abrupt and less 'accidental' than it has sometimes been made out to be. It is, however, the recent ANC election victory, resulting in a truly elected black-dominated government that has seemingly placed the language of reconstruction firmly on centre stage. Both before and after the elections, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) has been the ANC's rallying call. In fact, it seems that it was within the circles of the ANC's labour alliances that the term reconstruction was popularised during the period of transition. (p. 245)

In this context, Maluleke laments the fact that the term 'reconstruction' is misunderstood, even though it is becoming increasingly sacred in ecclesiastical circles. He points out how it is being hijacked by the liberal church tradition, which he says is powerful and dominant in ecumenical and theological circles in South Africa. Maluleke (1994:247) warns, 'the present proposal for a *shift* from "resistance" to "reconstruction" must be understood within the context of a sustained rejection of black and African theologies of liberation by liberal theologians'.

The debate also reflected the euphoria of the rainbow nation. Boesak (2020:60) spoke strongly and reiterated that South Africans 'were seduced by the rainbow nation mentality'. He accused Mr De Klerk and some black theologians of allowing this to happen. He refers to the SABC interview in February in which he claimed Mr De Klerk was merely reaffirming his beliefs since 1994. He stated that apartheid was not morally wrong and refused to apologise for it (Boesak 2020:59). He also accused Mr De Klerk of encouraging the white South African to go his way. Boesak therefore accused black theologians of making Mr De Klerk think the way he did. Boesak (2020) accused black people of offering white people forgiveness they did not ask for:

So, it's not just white arrogance and unrepented racism that are to blame. We must take responsibility for the De Klerk's of this world. We invited him to parliament. We gave him honour and respect, even when we already heard him say these things. We know better. We cannot plead innocence. (p. 60)

The theology of restitution also emerged as influenced by the democratic project in SA. The need for this theology has been identified by Maluleke (2008b:683), 'because of their resonance with post-colonial and post-independence political economies'. Maluleke also identified areas where the theology of restitution should be applied. Among them, he directed that it should be activated between people and land, people and history, people and their institutions and people and their knowledge, men and women, men and men, women and women, black people and white people, black people and black people as well as white people and white people. He further argued that conversations about reparations in SA are usually avoided in favour of reconciliation and the latter is expected to be carried from the powerless to the powerful.

The theology of land also gained great importance in the early 1990s. The following anecdote on land became popular (Maluleka 1998a):

When White people came to our country they had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. They said 'let us pray' and we closed our eyes to pray. At the end of the prayer, they (Whites) had the land and we had the Bible. (p. 60)

Mofokeng (1987:24) argued that black people were dispossessed of their land, which was the basic source of production, livelihood and power. They have been turned into dispossessed workers whose only possession is their labour. By identifying black people as workers, these theologians elevated our struggle beyond civil rights to human rights, from an exclusive fight against racism to a social and national revolution. Mosala (1987:27) sees the soil as one of the forces of the mode of production: by the mode of production, he means an articulated combination of forces and relations of production. Productive forces refer to the means of production, for example, B. Land, livestock, trees, rivers, tools, machines, etc. plus human labour. Boesak (2020:59) refers to Mr. De Klerk in the CNN interview and says he speaks as if the problem was 'white people wanting too much land' and didn't think about it at all, which is at the core of the meaning of colonialism and what constitutes apartheid viz: expropriation, land theft, disenfranchisement, brutal oppression and genocide.

The theology of reconciliation was also discussed. Maluleke (2000:87–88) highlighted the ambiguity, contradiction and tension seen in Jesus' role in reconciliation, where he is at the centre between victims and perpetrators. He was based on Miroslav Volf in his construction of reconciliation theology after the Cold War. The suffering of Christ cannot be borne exclusively by the poor. There were tensions that were highlighted, for example, in relation to Christ, who stands on the side of the poor and also forgives evildoers. While God

favours the poor, he also has a preferential option for all of humanity and all of creation. Boesak (2020:57), drawing on the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke, argued that reconciliation is hypocritical unless it is radical, real and revolutionary. Cone and West (2018) support this view. They hold that:

[T]he black community has experienced the crushing white thing too long. Therefore, Black Theology believes that in order for reconciliation to be meaningful and productive, black people must have room to do their thing. The black community itself must lay down the rules of the game. (p. 92)

Reddie (2014:46) agrees that effective reconciliation between the oppressed and the oppressor is possible, as in the example of Zacchaeus, where there is reparation in the form of the return of what was wrongfully taken away.

During this time, the existence and meaning of Black Theology was also questioned. Maluleke argued that in the second half of the 1980s, several points were pushed onto the Black Theology agenda from both within and without. The first, which came mainly from outside, was the statement that Black Theology was either dead, redundant or overtaken by events. Two reasons were put forward, namely the popularly perceived shift of Black Consciousness as a political strategy towards non-racism and the demise of apartheid. A possible third reason is the sheer difficulty of having race conversations in a political situation in which race is no longer the primary issue (1998a). For this reason, Maluleke (1996:8) also emphasises the importance of detaching Christianity from colonialism, thereby making room for the construction of a more positive theology in contrast to the currently embittered black and other African theologies. He points out that these theologians are:

[T]ired of doing theology in a fighting mode. War is tiresome. Also, some Black and African theologians are looking for alternative histories for Africans – other than those of oppression, imperialism and dispossession. (p. 8)

Molobi (2010:9), in his interview of Maimela, revealed that Black Theology activities became silent since 1993 after the International Conference on Black Theology organised by both Black Theology project and Institute for Contextual Theology sponsored by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Motlhabi (2005) was correct to locate the problem:

One reason for this lapse of activity is that many veteran black theologians have left academic work and gone into administrative positions. This trend is not conducive to continuing with any serious and enduring academic pursuits. The few who remain in the academy seem, like the whole theological climate now existing in the country, to have been thrown into confusion about what their next step or plan of action should be and to be paralysed by the new circumstances with their new sets of problems. (p. 15)

Molobi (2000:16) considers the cause of the death of the Black Theology from the perspective of its disconnection from the struggle of the people and that black theologians are no

longer practising pastors and seminary teachers. He also pointed out that Black Theology no longer attracts the oppressed because of changing and multiplying political strategies and expanding opportunities.

## Conclusion and way forward

This study historically traces the debate over Black Theology from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. It illustrated the heavy hand of apartheid and the corresponding activism of the oppressed. The end of this period was positive as it ended with the formation of the democratic government. The question was the political climate in the reporting period that shaped Black Theology praxis. It became apparent that the political dynamics of this period shaped the practice of black theologians.

The debate touched on various topics that showed contextual expressions of theology in response to the dynamics of political oppression. Topics discussed included setting the original agenda of Black Theology, ethics of hermeneutics, gender, question of black culture, AICs, African theology, Pan-Africanism in theology, the confusion caused by apartheid's reform programme and the memory of suffering and exodus, difference between Black Theology and European theology, the future of Black Theology, suggested themes for future contextual expressions, the theology of restitution, reconstruction, land, the euphoria of the rainbow nation, among others.

This investigation found that Black Theology activities declined during this period and that its death was confirmed as early as the mid-1980s. The democratic process in 1994 marked the final nail in the death of Black Theology, leaving few left. Motlhabi (2005) is therefore correct to conclude that:

[T]here have been no major seminars or conferences on black theology in South Africa since 1996. Nor have there been any significant or ground breaking publications since then. This is regrettable in view of the changes that have taken place in the country since the fall of apartheid and the 1994 democratic elections. (p. 18)

It was observed that other topics were not addressed during the period under review. Despite this, the topics discussed influenced future debates in other phases. This requires the view that other theologies need to be constructed based on the debates of the time. The topics of Ubuntu, forgiveness and others fall into this category. It is also necessary that future contextual trends be identified in advance in order to prepare relevant contextual theologies. For example, the church was surprised by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Reading the trends should create a kind of theology of pandemics.

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## Ethical considerations

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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

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