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# Doing Practical, Public Theology in the Context of South Africa's Decolonization Discourse

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## I. Background

The African continent faces challenges that range across social, political, economic and religious issues. They include corruption, conflicts, oppression, migration, social injustice, weak rule of law, HIV and AIDS, and many other challenges. On Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, which measures the perceived level of public-sector corruption from zero to 100, every African country scores below 50 except Botswana; the global average is 43, but for sub-Saharan Africa it is 33.<sup>1</sup>

Churches are also experiencing specific challenges in this context. Using the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa (DRCSA) as an example, Sekhalelo observed that they are confronting such issues as the rise of South Africa as a secular state, religious pluralism, marginalization of minorities, decline in membership commitment, a legitimacy crisis and

general moral decay.<sup>2</sup>

A concerted effort by various players is required to provide multifaceted responses. The players include politicians, community leaders, academic institutions, churches and other societal players. Our interest in this discussion is churches. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, rightly maintained that churches as Christian communities should participate in activities that assist humanity to flourish. He stated, 'Christian community has to learn civic virtues that will create civic flourishing and to learn how to exercise those tasks of decision-making within community and maintaining and sustaining a human environment.'<sup>3</sup>

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2 M. Sekhalelo, 'The Challenges Facing the Dutch Reformed Churches in the South African Liberal Democracy', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016), a3031, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3031>.

3 Rowan Williams, 'Relations between the Church and State Today: What Is the Role of the Christian Citizen?' (2015), address given at Manchester University, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles>.

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1 Ernst & Young, *Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index* (2014), viewed 1 April 2015 at [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org), 9.

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Williams argues that Christian communities cannot opt out of public and social issues or existing challenges, but should live out a different identity and vision in the world. This means that churches should attend to issues that directly affect the life and progress of people, and participate in addressing public issues such as corruption, governance and oppression. The challenge for churches to respond to public issues is a concern for theological disciplines such as practical theology, public theology and pastoral care.

It is useful to describe and distinguish these three disciplines. Practical theology focuses on ensuring that theology is useful and relevant to everyday concerns. Public theology focuses on interaction with public issues in contemporary society. Pastoral care is concerned with providing support to people in pain and anxiety, including any situation.

Practical theology is interconnected with public theology, as it includes a public dimension in its work.<sup>4</sup> However, as Dreyer indicates, 'Not all practical theology is public theology, in other words aimed at a non-ecclesial general audience. Practical theology is also theology for the church, that is for a Christian audience, and is theology for an academic audience.'<sup>5</sup>

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php/2009/relations-between-the-church-and-state-today-what-is-the-role-of-the-christian-citizen, 2.

4 R. Osmer and F. Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 215.

5 Y. Dreyer, 'A Public Practical Theological Theory for Religious Education of Secularised Youth', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theologi-*

The days are long gone when the practices of the church and clergy were the main or the only focus of practical theology. The vision has broadened to include the context of everyday life on a local, national and global level. Osmer and Schweitzer usefully explained that the task of public practical theology is discerned in three ways: first, ensuring that the public is one of the audiences of practical theology; second, ensuring that practical theology includes everyday concerns and issues in its reflection; and third, facilitating a dialogue between theology and contemporary culture.<sup>6</sup> In linking public theology and pastoral care, Koppel maintained:

Practicing public theology asks that pastoral care practitioners and theologians take seriously and engage mindfully with issues that concern groups of people and whole populations, rather than individual persons in isolation. Framing pastoral care ministries, education, and institutions through this larger social lens helps theorists and practitioners to refine methods and purposes for our common work.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, public theology acts as a larger social lens that, in the process, should lead to framing pastoral care ministries. In practicing public pastoral care, the pastor should be 'involved with people in and for the

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*cal Studies* 60, no. 3 (2014), 919.

6 Osmer and Schweitzer, *Religious Education*, 218.

7 M. S. Koppel, 'Practicing Public Pastoral Theologies in Contexts of Difference', *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 25, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2015.1123923>, 151.

community'<sup>8</sup>

Gathogo's argument for African Reconstruction Theology provides a useful connection between practical theology and public theology as well as between public theology and pastoral care in Africa.<sup>9</sup> Gathogo advised that a theology of reconstruction in Africa is a wakeup call to theological practitioners (theologians and church leaders) in Africa to pursue an agenda that is pastorally holistic in society.

The theme of shifting theology, and particularly pastoral care, from private spiritual nourishment to public space is gaining currency.<sup>10</sup> Koppel reported that the 2015 Society for Pastoral Theology Annual Study Conference, titled 'Practicing Public Pastoral Theologies in Contexts of Difference', explored scholarly and practical dimensions for the exercise of public pastoral theology.<sup>11</sup> Lartey and Sharp added that this theme was intended to encourage multiple public conversation partners to whom pastoral theology is accountable and implicated to engage each other in thoughtful dialogues.<sup>12</sup> They added that respon-

sible public pastoral practice requires negotiating complex tensions in communities. Thus, strategic public pastoral theology aims to foster both deep self-reflection and expansive global or even cosmic citizenry.

The challenge posed by the shift to public pastoral care is, for theology, to effectively engage with social issues to participate in creating civic flourishing in addition to spiritual issues. Therefore, Vanhoozer and Strachan advised that the pastor should be a theologian by saying 'what God is saying in Christ'. At the same time, he or she should be a public figure, which means that he or she should 'publicly be involved in and for the community'.<sup>13</sup>

Miller-McLemore described developments regarding the movement of pastoral care to public theology as, first, a concern about the silence of mainstream Christianity on key social issues, and second, awareness of the limitations of pastoral focus on the individual alone. These factors force pastoral care to focus on the whole person and on public issues.

From the developments mentioned above, the call for theology, especially pastoral care, to engage in public issues is evident. The gap in pastoral care of silence on these issues and focusing on individuals in a context where challenges and needs exist within the public spaces is deplorable. As Juma states, public theology is about interpreting and living theological beliefs and values in the public realm and not only within the church. This includes making the role,

**8** Kevin J. Vanhoozer and O. Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 17.

**9** J. Gathogo, 'African Theology of Reconstruction as a Practical Theology for All', *Practical Theology in South Africa* 24, no. 2 (2007), 99–121.

**10** See B. J. Miller-McLemore, 'Pastoral Theology and Public Theology', in E. Graham and A. Rowlands (eds.), *Pathways to the Public Square* (London: Transaction, 2005), 95–106.

**11** Koppel, 'Practicing', 151.

**12** E. Y. Lartey and M. A. M. Sharp, 'Practicing Public Pastoral Theologies in Contexts of Difference', *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 25, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1064>

9867.2015.1123504, 134.

**13** Vanhoozer and Strachan, *Pastor as Public Theologian*, 16–17.

function and contribution of churches visible in the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, public theology is not a private theological study, but a visible evidence of what God is doing in communities through human agents belonging to churches. Jesus highlighted the public visibility of Christian ministry by saying that no one lights a lamp and put it under a table (Mt 5:15).

Viewed through a public theology lens, pastoral care extends beyond spiritual nourishment and narrow *diakonia* care to engaging diverse issues affecting humanity: politics, leadership, corruption, injustice, etc. It should be highlighted, as Miller-McLemore noted, that pastoral care as usually understood, particularly in the USA, narrowly focuses on human 'angst and its appropriation of psychology, persons and pain'.<sup>15</sup> This pastoral perspective is different from the meaning of pastoral care in African Reconstruction Theology, which refers to the theological exercise of holistically engaging life issues such as tribalism, oppression, HIV, gender and global warming. Louw advances the same notion of pastoral care as holistic life care.<sup>16</sup> African Recon-

struction Theology 'is pastoral in that it seeks to restore and address the challenges experienced in many African communities'.<sup>17</sup>

Evident from the above discussion are the following challenges: first, the need for a theological approach that advances the good of life; second, the need to engage and reconstruct structures so that people may enjoy a better life; and third, the need for pastoral care as human care that should be performed in the public space as ideal practical theology.

In highlighting the contributions of practical theology, Miller-McLemore rightly stated that it has disrupted the space occupied by academic theology. It is about taking theology out to the streets and using what is learned from the streets to assess the adequacy of biblical, historical and doctrinal claims.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Gathogo states, such an approach in Africa is about engaging holistically with issues to develop and reconstruct Africa and address its issues head-on. This effort calls for theology to be relevant to the African continent.

To ensure such relevance, practical theology should be disentangled from imported agendas and approaches that mimic Western theological projects. This calls for a decolonization of practical theology to ensure that it engages with pressing public challenges for both African Christianity and social development.

But what is decolonization and what are the discernible elements that require decolonization? What

<sup>14</sup> F. Juma, 'Public Theology in the Face of Pain and Suffering: A Proletarian Perspective', *Consensus* 36, no. 2 (2015), <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol36/iss2/6>, 13.

<sup>15</sup> B. J. Miller-McLemore, 'Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2012-0002>, 17.

<sup>16</sup> D. J. Louw, *Cura Vitae: Illness and the Healing of Life in Pastoral Care and Counselling*, (Cape Town, Lux Verbi, 2008); D. J. Louw, *Wholeness in Hope Care: On Nurturing the Beauty of the Human Soul in Spiritual*

*Healing* (Vienna: LIT, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Gathogo, 'African Theology', 101.

<sup>18</sup> Miller-McLemore, 'Five Misunderstandings', 26.

steps can be taken as an effort towards decolonizing theology, particularly practical theology?

The argument advanced here is that pastoral care, as a practical theology discipline, should shift from private care and narrow *diakonia* focus to the public domain as part of its public function. To that end, within higher education conversation on decolonization, practical theology should use the public pastoral care nexus as a contextual launch pad. Practical theology should be critical and self-reflective so as to contribute to addressing Africa's challenges. We will look at a concrete example of such efforts in South Africa.

## II. Decolonization Discussion at South African Universities

The #RhodesMustFall movement, which started in early 2015 at the University of Cape Town, triggered a debate about decolonizing the academic space and curriculum. In response, the university created a task force to examine 'all the artwork and photographs in public spaces across the campus to consider and consult on what the university community as a whole would want to see celebrated, venerated and commemorated.'<sup>19</sup>

One month after the beginning of the movement, the statue of colonial figure Cecil Rhodes was removed. The movement also inspired similar efforts at the Stellenbosch, Rhodes and

Wits Universities, as the students called for a decolonization of universities and the curricula.

Decolonization is an effort to undo colonization. The proponents of decolonization in universities argue that universities are dominated by colonial Eurocentric ideas, theories and approaches to knowledge. Heleta argues that these Eurocentric colonial ideas and approaches do not reflect the lived experiences of black students, nor do they present African stories in the classrooms. Rather, they express colonial knowledge systems designed to denigrate and subjugate black people. This curriculum confronts black students with theories that negate their own lived experiences, dreams and aspirations.<sup>20</sup>

In focusing on Eurocentric approaches, Nyathi maintained that education is used as an instrument and vehicle of perpetuating colonization and colonial hegemonies.<sup>21</sup> Maldonado-Torres added that 'Education, including academic scholarship, national culture, and the media are three areas where this modern/colonial attitude tends to take hold and reproduce itself.'<sup>22</sup> The persistence

<sup>20</sup> S. Heleta, 'Decolonisation: Academics Must Change What They Teach, and How' (2016), <https://theconversation.com/decolonisation-academics-must-change-what-they-teach-and-how-68080>, 1.

<sup>21</sup> N. Nyathi, 'Decolonising the Curriculum: The Only Way through the Process Is Together' (2016), <https://theconversation.com/decolonising-the-curriculum-the-only-way-through-the-process-is-together-69995>.

<sup>22</sup> N. Maldonado-Torres, 'Outline of Ten Theses of Coloniality and Decoloniality' (n.d., accessed 11 March 2017), [http://frantzfanonfoundation-fondationfrantzfanon.com/IMG/pdf/maldonado-torres\\_outline\\_](http://frantzfanonfoundation-fondationfrantzfanon.com/IMG/pdf/maldonado-torres_outline_)

<sup>19</sup> M. Price and R. Ally, 'The Challenge of Decolonisation: UCT's Transformation Journey' (2016), <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/the-challenge-of-decolonisation-ucts-transformation>, 2.

and sustaining hegemonic forces of colonial tendencies and practices is termed *coloniality*.<sup>23</sup> Coloniality and decoloniality refer to the logic, metaphysics, ontology and matrix of power created by the massive processes of colonization and decolonization.<sup>24</sup> Hence, what is referred to as decolonization in this article is decoloniality.

In responses to the call for decolonization of universities, some of the questions posed reflected a genuine inquiry to explore ways of addressing colonial shackles in the curricula while others masked an attitude of resistance to change by academics. Heleta reported that some academics asked, 'What do they [black students] mean by decolonization? Going back to the Stone Age? Teaching only about South Africa and Africa? Isolation from the rest of the world?'<sup>25</sup> Modiri maintained that these cynical queries by mostly white academics, demanding that students explain to them what decolonization means, suggest their own illiteracy about the history and intellectual debates in their disciplines.<sup>26</sup>

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of\_ten\_theses-10.23.16\_.pdf, 8.

**23** Decolonial scholars refer to the enduring legacy of colonialism as 'coloniality' to distinguish it from the actual rule of colonial administrations (Grosfoguel 2007).

**24** W. Mignolo, 'Modernity and Decoloniality', in *Oxford Bibliographies* (2011), <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766581/obo-9780199766581-0017.xml>.

**25** Heleta, 'Decolonisation', 1.

**26** J. Modiri, 'In the Fall: Decolonisation and the Rejuvenation of the Academic Project in South Africa', *Daily Maverick* (2016), <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-10-16-in-the-fall-decolonisation-and-the-rejuvenation-of-the>

The vividness of colonial entanglement of universities is outlined by Mbembe, who explained that the presence of colonial symbols that tell a history of black oppression suggests a celebration of that history.<sup>27</sup> The maintenance of Eurocentric theories and models that hardly relate to African students' experience is nothing other than perpetuating foreignness as well as perpetuating propagation of colonialism. Universities have become systems of authoritative control through programmes, grading systems, methods of credits, acceptable and unacceptable standards and the complicity of professional bodies that accentuate modes of colonial education. Mbembe therefore concluded that this Eurocentric tradition has become hegemonic. It also represses anything that is articulated, thought and envisioned outside those frames. Hence, higher education institutions must undergo a process of decolonization of knowledge and of the university institution itself.

However, the scepticism towards decolonization expressed by some academics, whether black or white, should be acknowledged. Fanon is critical of decolonization when taken as Africanization, because it will result in merely the transferring of resources from white people to black middle-class people who then maintain the unfair advantages of the colonial past. Mbembe used an example of

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academic-project-in-south-africa/#.Wlcfjbfh28U.

**27** A. Mbembe, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive' (2015), <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf>.

Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) in South Africa and how it has been used as an instrument of looting by those in power. Therefore, using this example, it would be pointless if the decolonization of universities focused on increasing the number of black academics who serve to maintain the same colonial system. Prinsloo rightly warned that decolonizing universities is more than removing colonial and apartheid-era symbols, increasing the number of black academics and including African texts in the curriculum.<sup>28</sup>

Fanon advised that true decolonization is about self-ownership, which is the creation of new forms of life. This entails reshaping people and turning human beings into craftsmen and craftswomen in reshaping matters and form. The reshaping is not about mimicking or imitating the Eurocentric models, but generating new ones that are relevant to people. It's about ending Eurocentric models and starting human history anew. For Fanon, decolonization is a violent phenomenon whose goal is replacing certain species of humans by another species of humans. Violence here does not refer to physical violence, but expending effort in pursuing the replacement process with vigour. 'New species' refers to a new category of men and women who create new forms of life that govern and determine new futures.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o views decolonization as a process of seeing ourselves clearly in relationship to

ourselves and to other people in the world. He adds that decolonization is not an event that happens once, but an ongoing process of seeing ourselves clearly. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o also adds that decolonization is about re-centring ourselves intellectually and culturally by redefining what the centre is which is Africa. He views decolonization as rejecting the West as a centre of consciousness and cultural heritage and replacing it with Africa. However, this does not imply closing the doors to Europe or other traditions, but rather redefining the centre.<sup>29</sup>

In assessing the decolonization discourse, at least from the perspectives of Fanon and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, we seem to perceive a subtle contradiction. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o suggests not closing the doors to Europe and yet advocating for changing the centre. Surely there cannot be two centres. Africa, in this case, replaces the West. Fanon's notion of the creation of new life conjures up the notion of replacing another. In light of our discussion context, without experience and lacking certainty as to how a decolonized university curriculum looks like, scepticism and cynicism persist. They persist partly because of resistant white academics, but more so as a psychological response to cope with the fear and threat of the unknown.

For instance, when one considers Africa's history and developments in practical theology discussions, how could the notion of 'telling African stories that are not told' be a replacement of the historically established

28 E. H. Prinsloo, 'The Role of the Humanities in Decolonising the Academy', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215613608>, 165.

29 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981).



theories in practical theology? Thus, confusion and darkness arise when one tries to imagine a decolonized practical theology in the South African academy. To complicate the issue further, how can physics and mathematics be decolonized? Is translating content into IsiXhosa or IsiZulu sufficient decolonization? It is because of the complexity of other disciplines that Prinsloo suggested that the humanities are better placed to lead the discussion. However, Kamanzi rejected the notion that some disciplines are more suited for decolonization than others. He provided an argument from the natural sciences, his own discipline, which is worth citing at length:

The discipline of Electrical Engineering itself comes into being through a professionalisation of branches of applied physics and mathematics as means to further develop technology harnessing the phenomena of energy, electricity and electromagnetic waves. In the early South African context, the major economic drivers in the early stages of these departments would have been the generation and distribution of electrical energy, mining technology and military applications. All of these elements that shaped this emerging discipline are evidently not apolitical and formed as a response, to some extent, to the social, political and economic projects of the time. The pursuit then of a decolonized curriculum in this context must respond to the constraints of the existing economy and state pressures and answer fundamental questions around the 'role of the engineer' in the existing and future society in relation to the project

of self-reliance in the pursuit of self-determination. For example, if the future society were to decide to weigh up whether to nationalise access and production of its resources, would engineering schools be prepared to foster graduates who could fulfil this task, or are our existing curricula and educational systems built on the assumption that reliance on external expertise will be provided, thus rendering, to some extent, self-determination a perpetually risky decision?<sup>30</sup>

Kamanzi's argument dispels blockage of imagination, uncritical thinking and biased ways of exploring decolonization of the current universities' systems. It discourages lazy academics who do not want to renew, reform or engage with fresh contextual realities.

Modiri rightly argued that the cynicism towards decolonization of universities partly arises from 'self-induced blockage of mind' by some academics who have limited exposure to the history and intellectual debates in their discipline. And if an academic is characterized by such illiteracy and ignorance, we dare ask: Is that individual worth a university tenure or appointment? The answer is no insofar as universities are considered a place of critical discussion, reflection, development of new modes of thinking and knowledge.

The argument thus far has high-

<sup>30</sup> B. Kamanzi, 'Decolonising the Curriculum: The Silent War for Tomorrow', *Daily Maverick* (2016), <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-04-28-decolonising-the-curriculum-the-silent-war-for-tomorrow/#.WHjKW0aKUK>.

lighted four issues: (1) the existence of colonial hegemonic shackles in South African universities, (2) the proposed ways of doing decolonization according to Fanon and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, (3) the cynicism encountered in pursuing decolonization, and (4) the possibility of decolonization in all disciplines. The vexing question in decolonization, however, is: How can it be done?

While this question cannot be simplistically answered, some suggestions can be made. Nyathi maintained that the decolonization project should not focus on what needs to be taken away. He added that decolonization should strive for the best of both worlds, not an either-or situation. He stated that 'if there is useful African knowledge then I want it, and if Western scientists have a cure for cancer I also want it'.<sup>31</sup> This proposal by Nyathi seems simplistic and yet lays down an important principle, namely that decolonization should move to a common ground on which ideas and knowledge can be built.

Nyathi's proposal, however, presumes that academics are open, willing and comfortable about seamlessly embracing the two epistemological sources, whereas experience indicates the contrary. Heleta noted that university curricula are largely steeped in Eurocentric modes that are dominated by white people. Therefore, from a position of genuine innocence, how could such academics effectively and meaningfully participate in decolonization? With some white academics' limitations as to their understanding of black people

and Africa, there is a risk of academic reflection paralysis that could be counterproductive. For instance, how can a white academic teach the science of *tokoloshi* or witchcraft, which is a totally different worldview?

It is because of the reality of this threat to a productive university decolonization process that many scholars advise that decolonization of curricula is more than increasing black lecturers, assigning more black African authors or even having more dialogues about African stuff. It is also not about creating universities that are disengaged globally, but being global producers of knowledge. The knowledge should be relevant locally (in South Africa), continentally (Africa) and globally (the entire world).

Some lessons (both positive and negative) to avoid devastating failures can be learnt from Kenya and East Africa, where decolonization started in the 1960s. For instance, Tanzania has made considerable progress in using Swahili as the language of instruction at the university level. Thus, decolonization in an academic environment is in the first place a paradigmatic issue and a new mind-set.

As a way forward, in view of the staffing situation with many white academics, the following proposals have been suggested: (1) review and revamp content that is currently being taught by questioning its relevance to African contextual realities; (2) challenge academics' negative attitude towards Africa and encourage self-introspection (soul searching) regarding their allegiance, commitment and attitude to African knowledge; (3) include substantially useful and relevant readings about Africa; (4) encourage academics to be informed on African issues and challenge them

<sup>31</sup> Nyathi, 'Decolonising the Curriculum', 1-2.

to develop relevant theories.<sup>32</sup> These starting points for decolonizing universities are not a one-time event, but an ongoing process of engagement that challenges African academics and students to engage consciously with contextual realities. This should result in producing truly African academics and scholars in African 'pots'.

In view of the preceding discussion, how is decolonization relevant to practical theological reflection? Dreyer, citing other scholars such as Miller-McLemore, noted that, although practical theology has spread to many other parts of the world from its origins in Europe and USA, it is still very much tied to its European past. He added that a quick glance at the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* or at the membership list of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT) will confirm this domination.<sup>33</sup> The epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies of practical theologians in the Southern contexts are mostly absent from 'international' practical theological books such as *Wiley-Blackwell*.

In response to the question on practical theology and decolonization, Mbembe proposed two steps in what he called decolonization in the future tense. The first step is to approach the current situation with a critique of dominant Eurocentric academic models that do not fully acknowledge other thinking and knowledge-pro-

ducing subjects. This recognition of the present academic model and its shortcomings should lead to concrete steps that contribute to the desired improvements. These two steps will inform the next two sections, which focus on practical theology in light of the decolonization discussion and the proposed shifts towards the attainment of decolonized practical theology. Thus, the next two sections avoid what Tuck and Yang called treating decolonization as a metaphor when it is a practical reality. Hence, practical steps should be encouraged in practical theology for renewal and refocusing.<sup>34</sup>

### III. Reflections on Practical Theology within the Decolonization Discussion

What are some of the issues to consider in decolonization of practical theology? Miller-McLemore usefully describes practical theology as referring to four distinct enterprises with different audiences or objectives. She states that practical theology is

[a] discipline among scholars and an activity of faith among believers. And it has two other common uses: it is a method for studying theology in practice and it is a curricular area of subdisciplines in the seminary. Practical theology refers to an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday life, a method or way of analyzing theology in practice used by religious leaders and by

32 Heleta, 'Decolonisation', 1; Mbembe, 'Decolonising Knowledge', 1–4.

33 J. S. Dreyer, 'Practical Theology and the Call for the Decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa: Reflections and Proposals', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017), a4805, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4805>, 3.

34 E. Tuck and K. W. Yang, 'Decolonisation Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonisation: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), 1–40.

teachers and students across the theological curriculum, a curricular area in theological education focused on ministerial practice and subspecialties, and, finally, an academic discipline pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises.<sup>35</sup>

Miller-McLemore notes that each of the aspects of practical theology points to different locations—that is, from daily life to the library, and from fieldwork to classroom, congregation and community, academic guild and global context. These aspects are connected and interdependent.

Although Miller-McLemore's overview as quoted above is insightful, her further comments about practical theology are central to our decolonization discussion. She adds that practical theology redefines what constitutes theological knowledge or wisdom and seeks theology for the masses. It explores the dissonance between professed beliefs and lived realities in a critical manner.

Congruence on the goal of practical theology and decolonization of universities' discourse can be clearly discerned. Decolonization of universities is about creating schools that are relevant to African people's needs and aspirations in order to respond to national and continental needs (within a global context). This is about producing academic products that serve the masses. Converging with this goal is practical theology seen as theological knowledge and wisdom for the masses also. It is reflecting about theology that engages and contributes to

addressing issues of 'the good of the human race'.<sup>36</sup>

To that end, Berinyuu argued that the current theologies in Africa are inadequate to address African challenges such as dictators, political and ethnic conflicts and violence.<sup>37</sup> This gap in engaging contemporary challenges in African public theology has resulted in the birth of African Reconstruction Theology. Gathogo encapsulates the mission of pursuing what is good in Africa as developing a theology of reconstruction to rebuild (address) the various challenges. The agenda of reconstruction is a shift from the agenda of liberation theology, with Moses as its central figure, to Nehemiah with his agenda of rebuilding Jerusalem in ruins. In Nehemiah 2, Nehemiah assessed the situation of Jerusalem's ruins and developed a plan to address the situation. Gathogo and Mugambi therefore argued that the Nehemiah figure should inspire holistic engagement with various African issues such as bad governance, corruption and destructive spiritualities that are dubbed 'Sanballats' and 'Tobiahs' that hinder human flourishing.<sup>38</sup>

However, African Reconstruction Theology as driven by Nehemiah's hermeneutic prism has its weaknesses. It tends to simplistically draw

36 Williams, 'Relations between the Church and State Today', 2–4.

37 A. A. Berinyuu, 'Doing Public Theology in Africa: Trends and Challenges', in E. Graham and A. Rowlands (eds.), *Pathways to the Public Square* (London: Transaction, 2005), 155–56.

38 Gathogo, 'African Theology of Reconstruction'; J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1995).

35 Miller-McLemore, 'Five Misunderstandings', 20.

on one paradigm, namely Nehemiah's leadership and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, as a paradigm for an overall solution to complex problems.<sup>39</sup> The strength of this theological approach is, nonetheless, its focus on not blaming colonialism for every African problem and focusing on solutions. It emphasises the task of 'constructing new ways of doing things' as a motif.

Reconstruction theology seems to provide a perspective for engaging in a decolonized practical theology. Therefore, practical theology, as a theology of action, should 'imagine and explore ways' of doing responsible reconstruction theology that addresses public issues in a relevant manner, which entails a decolonized practical theology.<sup>40</sup>

How can practical theology in South African universities contribute to this decolonization mission? What are the colonial shackles that it

should address?

Practical theology in South Africa is evidently enmeshed in Eurocentric paradigms and transformation has been slow. It is unlikely that one will attempt to write a practical theology thesis or dissertation without being influenced by scholars such as Osmer, Ricoeur, Fowler, Gerkin, Heitink, Browning, Van der Ven, Schweiter, Kumlehn, Gadamer, Poling, Bass or Anderson. Transformation in practical theology has been led by students who have been questioning Eurocentric epistemological foundations.<sup>41</sup> The irony is that theological students and academics are comfortable with writing dissertations in practical theology or a discipline such as pastoral care in Africa without engaging with African scholars such as Mugambi, Njiroge, Kinoti, Gathogo, Getui, Maluleke and Bediako.

How many practical theology academics at our South African universities strive to forge partnerships with colleagues in the USA, Canada, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands, just to mention a few countries? And when academics succeed in finding a colleague from the West to collaborate with, they treasure it greatly. My point is that, if practical theology reflection is not self-reflective and reflexive, operating within a colonial hegemonic framework tends to be the natural norm. Dreyer maintained that it is critical for academics to be reflexive in their research. This reflexivity entails being conscious about ourselves (who we are) and our positionalities within the process of conducting research, academic and knowledge production.

**39** This point warrants a separate detailed discussion which is not the focus of this article. Here, I will simply note that many other perspectives in biblical literature could be employed to address different situations, as an alternative to presenting Nehemiah as a 'silver bullet paradigm'.

**40** K. A. Cahalan and G. S. Mikoski (eds.), *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 3; Louw, *Cura Vitae*, 17; V. Magezi, 'Reflection on Pastoral Care in Africa: Towards Discerning Emerging Pragmatic Pastoral Ministerial Responses', *In die Skriflig* 50, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2130>, 6; P. Bowers, 'Christian Intellectual Responsibilities in Modern Africa', *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 28 (2009): 96–100; C. L. Bruyns, 'The Rebirth of Kairos Theology and Its Implications for Public Theology and Citizenship in South Africa', *Missionalia* 43, no. 3 (2015): 460, <https://doi.org/10.7832/43-3-131>.

**41** Dreyer, 'Practical Theology', 4–6.

The above point can be extrapolated to probe the extent to which South African academics are disposed to develop links and networks as a proxy for fostering a strong and deep African appreciation through collaborating with other African universities, e.g. in the humanities disciplines. How many practical theologians in South African universities have seriously explored partnerships with theological scholars in neighbouring African countries such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Kenya or Nigeria? The response is likely to be 'not many', although some initiatives have been forged. These include collaborative initiatives such as the Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) at Stellenbosch University, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Pan African Network HIV and AIDS (PACANET), African Network for Higher Education and Research HIV and AIDS (ANHERTHA) and many others being forged by South African academics with institutions such as Tumaini University Makumira (in Tanzania), Uganda Christian University, and the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology.

Another notable collaboration is the establishment of a pastoral care journal, *The Pastoral Journal for Life Care and Spiritual Healing*, to publish research from Africa and South America.<sup>42</sup> These initiatives indicate efforts to forge collaborations, but they still need to develop and be more popularized, which will happen with time. While these efforts are commendable, they are in early stages.

<sup>42</sup> The indicated collaborative initiatives are not meant to be exhaustive but illustrative.

The low collaboration of South African practical theologians in research or publications with other African countries is not unique to the theology discipline. The Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) observed that 'while university networks have emerged in most continents around the world, until now no special network of research (intensive) universities has been established in Africa.'<sup>43</sup> The main reason cited for non-participation is the highly uneven development of scientific research conducted throughout Africa, with a strong concentration of academic output in three countries: South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt. Evidently, there seems to be little effort in enforcing African epistemological foundations that are pertinent in developing a decolonized African knowledge.

This state of poor engagement with other African scholars, while focusing on partnering with Western colleagues, suggests an unconsciousness by academics regarding their deeply rooted Western inclination. This indicates a self-sustaining system of colonial hegemonic knowledge systems, including practical theology, by academics. This hegemonic situation is self-perpetuating unless there is reflexivity and academics are conscious of their positionality of power.<sup>44</sup> Not-

<sup>43</sup> Centre for Higher Education Transformation, 'African League of Research Universities', 2013, <https://www.chet.org.za/.../Cloete%20and%20Maassen%202013%20League%20of%20>

<sup>44</sup> M. Muhammad et al., 'Reflections on Researcher Identity and Power: The Impact of Positionality on Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Processes and Outcomes', *Critical Soci-*

ing the general superiority of South African universities because they produce the bulk of African research, one can extrapolate that South African academic colonial hegemonies tend to be also sustained by universities through viewing people with research partners in Western countries as having important collaborations while being lukewarm to collaborations with African partnerships.

In a previous article, after surveying the terrain of pastoral care in Africa, I stated that African pastoral care is fragmented and by implication lacks a clear organizing centre. Although this argument makes sense, there is indeed arguably an organizing centre on pastoral care in Africa, focusing on reconstruction in addition to what Masamba ma Mpolo called *homo africanus* principles—that is, the sanctity of life, the relation between illness, misfortune and sin, spirits and ancestors in the life of the community, and life experienced as a whole.<sup>45</sup>

Holistic pastoral care was inaugurated in 1990 when Bishop Desmond Tutu was the president of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC). This holistic, reconstruction-oriented

pastoral care agenda was followed by publications dealing with broad African issues by scholars such as Mugambi, Gathogo, Nwachuku<sup>46</sup> and others. This reconstruction agenda persists to this day among members from that era such as Mugambi, Tutu, Kinoti and Gathogo.

While the elements that require decolonization of practical theology such as celebrating Western collaboration, prescribed books, analytical frameworks and staffing are clear, the challenge lies in outlining how a decolonized practical theology looks like. This takes us to our next section.

#### IV. Pointers for Decolonizing Practical Theology

The question of a decolonized practical theology is a vexing one. It is difficult to describe and outline its tenets. What does a decolonized South African practical theology look like? Goto highlighted the difficulty in articulating theologies that bear geographical connotations such as African practical theology, Asian practical theology and others. He argues that such theologies are difficult to articulate, because the

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ology 41, no. 7–8 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513516025>, 1045–63.

<sup>45</sup> Magezi, 'Reflection on Pastoral Care', 3–4; see Masamba ma Mpolo, 'Spirituality and Counselling for Liberation: The Context and Praxis of African Pastoral Activities and Psychology', in K. Federsmidt, K. Temme & H. Weiss (eds.), *Voices from Africa on Pastoral Care: Contributions in International Seminars 1988–2008* (Dusseldorf, Germany: Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling, 2008), 7–18, [www.1.ekir.de/sipcc/downloads/IPCC-020-txt.pdf](http://www.1.ekir.de/sipcc/downloads/IPCC-020-txt.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Daisy Nwachuku's contributions (originally authored in 1991 and 2000) can be found as Daisy N. Nwachuku, 'The Situation of Women in Africa in the Process of Adjustment and Change', in K. Federsmidt, K. Temme and H. Weiss (eds.), *Voices from Africa on Pastoral Care: Contributions in International Seminars 1988–2008* (Dusseldorf, Germany: Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling, 2008), 35–52, [www.1.ekir.de/sipcc/downloads/IPCC-020-txt.pdf](http://www.1.ekir.de/sipcc/downloads/IPCC-020-txt.pdf), and 'Creating Communities through Pastoral Care and Counselling in the Fragmentations of Urban African Life', 97–106 in the same volume.

geographical people are not homogenous. For instance, one cannot speak of homogenous Africa. Despite this difficulty, Goto offered three useful points worth adapting in guiding our discussion of a decolonized practical theology.<sup>47</sup>

First, practical theology should engage in theological reflection in a manner that results in transformation. For instance, in our South African context, an engaged practical theology should result in engaging the colonial structures and its remnants as well as oppressive systems. Second, practical theology should make use of scholars in their context. This means practical theology in South Africa should use South African and other African scholars' theories. The scholars do not need to be black students, but should reflect a paradigmatic approach and mind-set that promote epistemologies and reflection approaches that engage with contemporary issues. For instance, an academic could juxtapose the approaches of Paul Ricoeur or Jurgen Habermas with African thoughts and draw conclusions as to how one could do practical theology that integrate their thoughts with African frameworks. Third, practical theology knowledge and wisdom should be derived from the people's wisdom and experiences.

In view of the fluidity involved in articulating a decolonized practical theology, the following pointers that build on Goto can be suggested as a starting point. A decolonized practi-

cal theology should include the following features:

1. It should seriously engage its context, resulting in transformation. The opposite of transformation is maintenance of the colonial hegemonic status quo. A decolonized practical theology should embrace a mission of ongoing reflection and transformation of the various aspects of humanity and the discipline itself (self-reflective).
2. Practical theology should engage with scholarship in South Africa and the African context. This includes critical engagement with both assigned reading materials and people's experiences.
3. Practical theology should draw its paradigms and models from people's wisdom and paradigms. This entails pursuing a theological approach that draws from African experiences. This can be explored as a way of bringing together three epistemological spheres: theological traditions, historical Western approaches, and African wisdom and experiences.
4. Practical theology should be self-critical of its centre and epistemological sources. It should ask questions about its motivations, agenda and contributions (re-centring, new life). This entails reflexivity and academics' consciousness of their positionality of power, resulting in intentional pursuit of agendas based on pressing challenges.
5. Practical theology should view itself as in continuous

<sup>47</sup> C. Goto, 'Asian American Practical Theologies', in K. A. Cahalan & G. S. Mikoski (eds.), *Opening Up the Field of Practical Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 34–37.



reformation and transformation. It is a process, not an event, which should enable it to engage with issues on an ongoing basis.

To provide a complete picture of the possibilities and constraints of decolonization of practical theology, the above proposed elements should be viewed in light of the persisting challenges. These challenges are stumps in the pathway.

## V. Stumps in the Path to the Decolonization of Practical Theology

I take the metaphor of a stump to refer to an obstruction on the path to reaching your destination. These stumps destruct and divert. They are countering threats. The proposals for a decolonized practical theology would be incomplete without highlighting these countering forces or threats. Unfortunately, these countering forces are the 'elephant in the room' for practical theology in the South African academy—that is, the problem or risk that no one wants to discuss. I suggest the following three forces for consideration.

The first is the tension between a focus on black African issues and the threat of compromised academic rigour. Whether perceived or real, there are observable elements of tension that exist between African scholars and the fluid unwritten standards in scholarship as evidenced by publications. Gifford observed that, in an effort to achieve quick publications, some unpolished papers get published by the mushrooming number of publishers. This has resulted in critical issues that require in-depth

and theoretical reflection but which remain neither explored nor academically considered in a systematic manner. Therefore, he hesitatingly stated that this situation has caused a deficiency in African theological reflection.<sup>48</sup>

Gifford's concern was echoed by one black African academic in a casual conversation at a conference. He quipped:

If you try to publish on a subject or anything with foundations in Western thinking your work will hardly get published. The critique will be harsh. Therefore, to overcome this hurdle I publish on African issues only. For instance, white people don't have experience in witchcraft so they can't reject my work.

This statement implies that publishing is controlled and guarded by white people who could use their positions to exclude black people, and hence one should bust the system. The above statement resonates with what Senokoane referred to as 'institutional racism, otherwise known as white ethics',<sup>49</sup> which positions itself as a standard or norm in the institution and at the same time places itself as the only good while other experiences and knowledge are bad and do not meet the standard. The destructive effect of this situation, perceived or real, is, if not managed, that unpolished research gets published by a weakened review system.

It should be noted that some black academics tackle African contextual

48 P. Gifford, 'Africa's Inculturation Theology: Observations of an Outsider', *Hekima Review* 38 (2008), 31–33.

49 T. Senokoane, 'A White Mist in the Black UNISA', *Scriptura* 114, no. 1 (2015), 1.

issues that have limited prior published research for benchmarking.<sup>50</sup> This challenge tends to be compounded by weak academic language proficiency. In view of this situation, I suggest strong mentoring and coaching of young developing African scholars by senior black academics and white academics. Surely universities should live up to their status of generating knowledge, new theories and robust scholarship. The practical theologians, regardless of their race, who evade the quality control and research output gatekeepers (publishers, reviewers and editors) seen as stifling certain types of knowledge and who thus become gateways for the production poor practical theology research are deplorable and should be condemned.<sup>51</sup> This stands against the spirit of genuine decolonization and generation of knowledge that can be exported globally.

Second, there is pressure from South Africa's National Research Foundation rating system to focus one's research and yet African challenges are broad and holistic. Is NRF

a colonial hegemonic structure that requires decolonization or is it leading to quality, focused scholarship? The answer seems to lie somewhere in the middle.<sup>52</sup> Dreyer and Pandey and Pattnaik contended that the entire research ecosystem should be scrutinized, because it consists of human capital (e.g. the researchers), governance capital (e.g. the research policies), physical capital (e.g. the research equipment or facilities), intellectual capital (such as knowledge, information and ideas) and lastly financial capital (e.g. research grants and funding). All these systems could easily reflect colonial residual practices (coloniality) and structures that should be changed.<sup>53</sup>

Third, there is a trend of targeting international knowledge consumers and downplaying African people's issues. Academics are pressured to publish internationally, which means focusing on global issues, and yet the issues relate to a particular context. The idea that scholars are assessed by the impact of their work suggests that they should situate themselves globally, and yet people based in, say, New York or Berlin will hardly be interested in studies of an African rural community. This means by targeting international audience you may have to ignore local relevance to ensure global relevance. Thus local targeting and international targeting remains a

**50** Dreyer, 'Practical Theology', 5 proposes tapping on this practical knowledge of people on the ground that usually does not get published.

**51** For examples of fake peer review and poor research being published, see J. Kastrenakes, 'Sham Science: Fake Research Paper Accepted by Over 100 Journals' (2013), <https://www.theverge.com/2013/10/3/4798840/fake-research-paper-exposes-poor-standards-open-access-journals>; C. Seife, 'Science's Big Scandal: Even Legitimate Publishers Are Faking Peer Review', *Slate*, 1 April 2015, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2015/04/fake\\_peer\\_review\\_scientific\\_journals\\_publish\\_fraudulent\\_plagiarized\\_or\\_nonsense.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2015/04/fake_peer_review_scientific_journals_publish_fraudulent_plagiarized_or_nonsense.html).

**52** See National Research Foundation, 'NRF Rating', <http://www.nrf.ac.za/rating>, for a discussion of its purposes and process.

**53** Dreyer, 'Practical Theology', 5; S. C. Pandey and P. N. Pattnaik, 'University Research Ecosystem: A Conceptual Understanding', *Review of Economic and Business Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015): 172, <https://doi.org/10.1515/rebs-2016-0021>.

tension for decolonization of scholarship.

## VI. Conclusion

This article has discussed practical theology within South Africa's discussion of the decolonization of university curricula. It highlighted the need for practical theology and pastoral care to increasingly assume a public role. In South Africa, this public role entails developing a theology that genuinely engages with contemporary issues. To that end, reconstruction theology provides a useful nexus. However, for practical theology to effectively perform a reconstructive role, it should be practical and relevant to its context. Relevance, among other things, entails shaking off colonial shackles; that is, it requires decolonization.

As discussions of decolonizing universities brew in South Africa,

practical theology is equally faced with the same challenge. Far from being a simplistic project, decolonization requires serious discipline introspection, academic reflection that is reflexive, and academics who are conscious of their positionality within the remnants of the colonial power matrix. This process is a journey, an ongoing experimentation with new ways of generating knowledge. Importantly, however, decolonization entails an intentional process of doing theology on a plane with three interlocking interfaces: theology and its traditions, Western historical paradigms through which theology has been done thus far, and African wisdom and knowledge. From this perspective, practical theology becomes an open process of learning, unlearning and re-learning in the space of practical life where people yearn for disentanglement from colonial hangover.