



Religious insularity and its bearing on racial tensions: Can there be unity in diversity?

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Abstract

The worrying racial tensions, particularly in South Africa and the United States of America, call for unity among the world's diverse, multi-cultural and pluralistic societies. It has become necessary to recognise and confront the reality of diversity, but such diversity must not be feared. Rather, it should be embraced with openness, as the richness of God's creation. In countries like South Africa and America, where ethnic, racial and religious tensions are more pronounced, it is necessary to explore ways in which unity may be allowed to grow in the midst of diversity. Otherwise, division and exclusion may overwhelm the pursuit for social justice. With diversity however, comes the problem of symmetry. How is the modern society to achieve unity in the midst of diversity, mostly in countries that are rife with racial tensions? This paper grapples with this question in order to propose a theology of transformation, which seeks to celebrate rather than fear diversity.

Keywords: Diversity, Unity, Racism, Religious Insularity, Complementarity, Theology, Transformation

Introduction

There are worrying levels of racial tensions and intolerance throughout the globe. This is even more noticeable in countries like South Africa and the United States of America. These tensions call for unity among the world's diverse, multi-cultural and pluralistic societies. It has become necessary to acknowledge and to constructively deal with the reality of diversity. With the acknowledgement of diversity however, comes the difficulty of maintaining symmetry. Thus, the question becomes: How is contemporary society to achieve unity in the midst of diversity, predominantly in countries that are rife with racial tensions and exclusion? This paper employs the literary review method to engage with the insularity of the church and to propose a theology of transformation, which seeks to celebrate rather than fear diversity.

Methodological stance

The study used a qualitative research method, specifically Document Analysis, in order to engage with existing literary documents that deal with the issue of race and religion. Ritchie and Lewis (2003:3) states that "document analysis involves the study of existing documents, either to understand their substantive content or to illuminate deeper meanings which may be revealed by their style and coverage". The study therefore relied heavily on both secondary and tertiary sources. These were critically evaluated and used to engage with the topic of discussion, which is: "Religious Insularity and Its Bearing on Racial tensions". The central point of enquiry, which the study tries to address, is "Can there be unity among the world's diverse, multi-cultural and pluralistic societies?" Especially in societies like South Africa and the United States of America where incidents of racism are noticeable. A qualitative research approach



was therefore deemed suitable for this end. This is because a “[...] qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter; it attempts to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). This approach enabled me to interpret the socio-religious contexts of Africans, both from a historical reconstructive view and existential view, using both South Africa and the United States of America as a case study.

The paradoxical nature of religion – Christianity

Religion, in the words of Charles Villa-Vicencio (1991:9), “has always been [a] contested ground in South Africa – functioning both as an instrument of subjugation and as means of resistance”. Thus, religion has primarily been a paradox within the South African context. It is both destructive and constructive. It is destructive when it functions as an instrument of subjugation; but constructive when it shoulders the role of resistance against oppressive systems. Due to this dualistic role, religion resembles a double-edged sword, which cuts both ways. Looking back, one may quickly dredge upon the era of the Apartheid, which may easily be summed-up as the problem of religion (Christianity in particular). But at the same time, one may come to acknowledge the sway of religion, as a weapon of resistance against social injustice, as was the case with resistance against the Apartheid and its ‘State Theology’ (Kairos, 1985:9).

Religion, in this instance, was destructive as it ushered racial segregation or discrimination, but also constructive as it brought about an end to Apartheid through Liberation Theologies. It was, therefore, the catalyst of racial segregation, but also an antidote which dismantled the grab of racial discrimination. This has been the paradoxical nature of religion. It is a problem that is loaded with potential solutions, and these opposing ideals live side by side. This has been the role of religion in South Africa – a contest of Christianity against Christianity; and the battle of liberation over and against subjugation. But as to whether the influence of religion, as a weapon of resistance over and against the Apartheid was comprehensive, it is inconclusive. The debris of Apartheid seem to be freely sprouting within the post-Apartheid society. This can be seen from the national protest, which took place on the 5th of November 2017, with the killing of Farmers – an event otherwise known as Black Monday (City Press, 2017/11/05).

This is due to the fact that some of the solemn questions which scholars like Albert Nolan (1994:213-215) posed twenty-three years ago, regarding *Kairos* theology within the South African context, have not yet been adequately answered. Nolan (1994:214), in view of the then Apartheid context, asked some critical faith questions, which the oppressed of the time, and probably of today, continue to ask. Where was God in the Apartheid, anti-Apartheid squabble? What did God want his ministers to do in such circumstances? And what could they do, or say to stop the violence, particularly the violence of the aggressor? In my view, these questions are still to be answered. But there appears to be no concrete answers coming from the church, in attempt to address these concerns.

Ironically, African-Americans in the United States of America (USA), seem to be battling with the same issue of subjugation and racial discrimination. As in South Africa, religion (particularly Christianity) was used to justify the exploitation of African-Americans as slaves in order to build and grow the American polity and its economy. They were deprived of their human rights and subjected to servitude. As was the case, they drew solace from, and used religion (mainly Christianity and Islam) as an instrument of resistance against subjugation. Thus, religion became the ruthless system that ushered oppressive policies, but also a powerful instrument which brought about liberation.

The disconsolate reality, however, in these brutal incidents of subjugation and anti-subjugation, is that the church was directly or indirectly involved in some way or other. The imagery of ‘the God of love’ was overshadowed by brutality and bloody conflicts, which



promoted one race over the other; and these were daringly and ashamedly sanctioned under the name of God. The message of the church was also inconsistent – the dominant side argued that God was their strength, while the oppressed claimed that God sided with the poor. The two sides no longer understood the implications of their faith, even though both claimed allegiance to the same triune God, the same Christian faith, and the one Universal church (Ephesians, 4:5).

Divisions became a *modus operandi*, which was appropriately justified and sustained through the word of God. As a result, different religious thoughts developed within the same religious system – these were Black and White religious thoughts. James Cone (1993:1-2) embodied this discord in the following way:

Black religious thought is not identical with the Christian theology of white Americans. Nor is it identical with traditional African beliefs, past or present. It is both – but reinterpreted for and adapted to the life-situation of black people' struggle for justice in a nation whose social, political and economic structures are dominated by a white racist ideology. It was the "African" side of black religion that helped African-Americans to see beyond the white distortions of the gospel and to discover its true meaning as God's liberation of the oppressed from bondage. It was the "Christian" element in black religion that helped African-Americans to re-orient their African past so that it would become more useful in the struggle to survive with dignity in a society that they did not make (Cone, 1993:1-2).

This dualistic notion of Christian theology for the white (or western theology) and black religious thought (Liberation theologies) has brought discord to the unity of the church. The two just do not find a common place and this is the sad reality of the oppressed against the oppressor. But even at this jeopardy, there are those who assume a neutral position and argue that the imminent racial problems are political and therefore none of their business. These cowardly maintain that the church must never take sides, but remain neutral to avoid conflicts (Nolan, 1994:214). And too often, Christians have tended to turn a blind eye to racism, or have been willing to stand aside while others take the lead against racial discrimination.

Some churches, as well, have been hesitant to confront this issue, saying "it was not our responsibility" (Sanou, 2015:96). Therefore, it is time that we critique the role of the church in this matter. Is the church doing enough to confront this issue? Has it stopped wavering? If so, how is the church proclaiming, with one accord, that God is one? And that in Him, there is no colour, no race, or discord? This is the central message, which the law of love demands. Not for a particular group or race, but for the rest of humanity. So that all of humanity may attain dignity, equality and recognition that exists without limitations or any imposed laws of subjugation and racial discrimination. This should be the ultimate end, at which all efforts must focus.

Racial discrimination in Christian context

Christendom, as far as modern history can account, has always been fraught with racial divisions and non-diversity. As such, there has been little focus directed at the concept of unity in diversity. Richard Perry (2007:96), for instance, notes that in Spain, scholars began to debate the nature of the recently discovered Native Americans (Indians) around the sixteenth century, and argued over appropriate measures in which to deal with them. These debates, particularly at the School of Salamanca, occurred within a theological framework (Perry, 2007:96). Unreasonable questions, such as the following, were often points of contention and enquiry for scholars:

Did Native Americans have souls? Were they descended from Adam and Eve, or were they the offspring of a different creation? Was it permissible to use them as slaves for brute labor, or was it a Christian duty to convert them to the true faith? Did Native Americans' ignorance of Christ condemn them, or should they be given the opportunity to save their souls through education? (Perry, 2007:96).

The above citation therefore, seems to suggest that the sixteenth century scholars, particularly those of Salamanca, did not know much about racial diversity, or how to deal with it. They regarded the people who were different from them as of less status than they. In that manner,



they questioned whether such people even had souls, or were an offspring of a different creation. They debated whether it was appropriate or permissible to use them as slaves for brute labour. Perplexed by these questions, they initially followed the reasoning of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and later exchanged it for that of Aristotle (384-322). This was an attempt to develop an understanding that would be deemed as appropriate in dealing with Native Americans (Perry, 2007:96).

This understanding largely rested upon the notion of servitude. Both Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle had earlier communicated and justified a tolerant attitude towards servitude (Zagal, 2003:5). But the central variance between these two scholars was that Thomas Aquinas predominantly qualified the doctrine of incidental (natural) inequality, while Aristotle taught the doctrine of natural slavery. In his principle of incidental inequality, Thomas Aquinas believed that all humans were equal in essence, but that they are made unequal by their education, costumes, environment, their own natural dispositions, and the exercise of freedom.

Therefore, Aquinas believed that servitude was just and drew some distinctions between two kinds of justices in servitude. These distinctions are summed-up by Zagal (2003) in the following manner:

Thomas considers servitude something just, yet he distinguishes two kind(s) of justice: justice *simpliciter* and justice *secundum quid*. Servitude is not just *simpliciter*, since all men are equal by essence, even more since all men have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Human nature is not predicable equivocally for every individual. Servant are as humans as their masters. Every man is truly a human person and, subsequently, is an individual substance of rational nature with an eternal destiny that is loved personally by the Creator. Attending to human nature considered in itself, all men are equal and, because of that, there is no pre-eminence of one over the other. The master as participant of the human nature has no domain over the servant. Servant and lord are essentially men. Servitude is just *secundum quid*, under a particular scope [...]. In other words, servitude is legit by its consequences. The relationship between servant and lord is just only and only if it implies retribution, a wellbeing for both of the parts that constitute the relation. "Human comfort" is the fundament of this relationship (Zagal, 2003:6-7).

Thus, even though Thomas Aquinas believed in servitude, his ideal of servitude rested upon the basis of human comfort – that is, the equal recognition of humanity, where both lord and slave, in essence, are perceived as equally human. Under such circumstances, the wellbeing of both (lord and slave) constituted a mutual relationship. Thomas Aquinas therefore, can be said to have communicated and justified an ideal which did not promote racial tensions, or the superiority of one racial group over the other, but that of mutual collaboration between slaves and lords.

But because this ideal, probably, restricted the control of lords over their slaves, the scholars of Salamanca quickly abandoned it and began to embrace that of Aristotle – particularly his doctrine of natural servitude. Aristotle had taught the principle of natural slavery, and it played a significant role in the perception of Native Americans and Blacks in Spain. In his principle of natural slavery, Aristotle argued that:

For in all things which form a composite whole and which are made up of parts, whether continuous or discrete, a distinction between the ruling and the subject element comes to light. Such a duality exists in living creatures, originating from nature as a whole (*Politics*, I, 2, 1254a 29-34).

In this argument, Aristotle postulated that the natural order is composed of dualistic symmetry that is made up of the ruling and subject elements. He maintained that there is the superior and inferior order of being, and that it is best for the inferior to subordinate to the superior, for such a relationship is only natural (Maxwell, 1975:44). Thus, within the multiple relations that persons encounter, there must exist a dualistic symmetry, as some people are born to rule and others to serve. This was the fundamental basis to Aristotle's principle of natural slavery.



His philosophy on servitude and its application can be argued to wholly rest upon the following premise:

[...] it is clearly natural and beneficial to the body that it should be ruled by the soul [...]. Tame animals have a better nature than wild, and it is better for all such animals that they should be ruled by man because they then get the benefit of preservation [...]. We may thus conclude that all men who differ from others as much as the body differs from the soul, or an animal from a man [...], all such are by nature slaves, and it is better for them [...] to be ruled by a master. A man is thus by nature a slave if he is capable of becoming [...] the property of another, and if he participates in reason to the extent of apprehending it in another, though destitute of it himself [...]. But the use which is made of the slave diverges but little from the use made of tame animals; both he and they supply their owner with bodily help in meeting his daily requirements [...]. It is thus clear that, just as some are by nature free, so others are by nature slaves, and for these latter the condition of slavery is both beneficial and just (*Politics*, I, 2, 1254b 16).

Aristotle's conclusion on the matter, therefore, was that "...all men (humans) who differ from others as much as the body differs from the soul, or an animal from a man (person) [...], all such are by nature slaves, and it is better for them [...] to be ruled by a master" (*Politics*, I, 2, 1254b 16). This became the source of segregation and racial divisions in Spain. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, for instance, applying Aristotle's principle of natural slavery, argued that the Native Americans were non-rational beings, "who could be useful to the Spaniards and amenable to Christianity only by the application of force – in other words, by being enslaved" (Fredrickson, 2003:36).

Anthony Pagden (1982:116) further notes that de Sepúlveda viewed Native Americans as "barbarous and inhuman peoples abhorring all civil life, customs and virtue". Thus, the Native Americans were supposed to subject themselves under "the rulership of the more prudent, powerful and perfect Spaniards", whom they had to serve for their own benefit (Maxwell, 1975:62). In that manner, the Native Americans were seen as inferior and deserving of servitude.

Unlike de Sepúlveda, Bartolomé de Las Casas, who had personally observed the suffering, and high mortalities that had resulted from Indian forced labours in the Antilles, argued that the Indians do have reason and are capable of having a civil life (Fredrickson, 2003:37). He contended that they could be converted to Christianity, and made useful subjects of the Spanish crown through peaceful persuasion (Fredrickson, 2003:37). De Las Casas' motivation, in Pagden's view, rested upon the notion that all the races of the world are human, and the definition of all humans, and of each of them, is only one, and that is reason (Pagden, 1982:140).

But as Fredrickson (2003:37) noted, de Las Casas did not entirely stand against slavery. He did not "object to the importation of enslaved Africans to do the work on the plantations and in the mines that was proving so lethal to the Indians". However, his contention for the humanity of all races, based on the ability to reason, became the official policy of Spain (Maxwell, 1975:66). His views were mostly aligned with those of the Roman Catholic Church (Fredrickson 2003:37). The Roman Catholic Church was the first to declare that Native Americans had souls, which meant that it was wrong to mistreat or kill them for no reason.

To this, Pope John Paul III, on the 2nd of June 1537, declared that the Native Indians were human, and therefore capable of receiving the Faith and being saved (Maxwell, 1975:70). By this, the Pope was responding "to the upholders of a diabolical theory that the Indians are (were) subhuman and therefore may be enslaved like brute animals" (Maxwell, 1975:70). What appears to be disquieting however, is that the Roman Catholic Church did not make "any reference to the enslavement of the Negroes in West Africa nor to the transatlantic trade in Negro slaves" (Maxwell, 1975:70). No one objected to "the importation of enslaved Africans to do the work on the plantations and in the mines that was proving so lethal to the Indians" (Fredrickson, 2003:37).



The church was silent on this matter, even though Africans were vehemently taken, sold as commodity, and used as slaves. It was not “until the nineteenth century, after the European exploration of the continent of Africa and after first-hand descriptions of the sufferings of African slaves had become widely known, that this omission was rectified” (Maxwell, 1975:73). Thus, it took too long for the Roman Catholic Church to respond to the servitude of Africans. This response was even worse for Protestant churches, particularly those who embraced the Calvinist tradition. They were far much slower in recognising the humanity of Africans, and thereby refusing to accept their autonomy (Jacobson, 1987:275-301). Segregation was, therefore, part of their religious discourse, as most Protestant churches continued to be divided within the racial lines – having Black and White churches (Haldeman, 2007:18).

Religious insularity – The case of South Africa and USA

South Africa and the United States of America seem to share a historical context in which racial discrimination and injustice plays a prominent role. This history includes the extent to which both Blacks and Whites live in separate geographical zones; the segregation of cities (neighbourhoods or townships) by race; the sanction of legal policies, which promoted or enforced segregation; the oppression of the Blacks by Whites; and the socio-economic struggle of Blacks for independence, which culminated in the emergence of liberation theologies. These make the socio-political and racial contexts of either countries to intersect, or at least, touch-base at some levels. They are characterised by the Blacks’ struggle for liberation against oppression.

In South Africa, the foundations of racial segregation and oppression can be traced to what is known as “the Apartheid era”. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word which means ‘separation’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000:14). It was used for the racial policy, which was initiated by the Nationalist Government after 1948, justified by the Bible, under the ‘State theology’. The term ‘Apartheid’ was often refined into English, by the Nationalist Government, to the more anodyne sounding phrase, ‘the policy of separate development’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000:14). The Apartheid era therefore, was a time of segregation and discrimination. But before its definite enforcement, it was preceded in 1913 and 1936 by the Land Acts, which restricted the amount of land available to Black farmers to thirteen percent (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000:14).

This prepared the way for what would happen later on. When it was finally time to enforce the Apartheid in 1948, more restrictions and Acts were sanctioned. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000:14) asserts that:

[I]n 1948 the Apartheid laws were enacted, including the Population Registration Act, which registered all people by racial group; the Mixed Amenities Act, which codified racial segregation in public facilities; the Group Areas Act, which segregated suburbs; the Immorality Act, which illegalized white-black marriages; and the establishment of the so-called Bantustans, or native homelands, to which a large proportion of the black population was restricted.

Thus, racial grouping, racial segregation, zoning in geographical areas, illegalization of inter-marriages, and the establishment of native homelands, were the central characteristics of the Apartheid. By the time it was legally dismantled, Thomas Resane (2015:176-177) notes that:

[T]he apartheid regime had already balkanised South Africa into 11 territories. These were the greater South Africa for Whites, Coloureds, Indians and some privileged Blacks; the four “independent” states of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei, and the six Self-Governing Territories of Gazankulu, KwaZulu, Kangwane, KwaNdebele, Lebowa, and QwaQwa.

The Apartheid regime was therefore, backed-up by political interests, which authorised unjust laws. These were intended to restrict the amount of land available for Black farmers (Ashcroft,



Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2000:14). As a result, the independent states and self-governing territories, which Blacks lived, were derogatively labelled the “Bantustans” (Resane, 2015:177). Separateness was therefore, thought to be the cure of racial interactions. In theory, the establishment of native homelands (or Bantustans), provided a solution but “since the white minority retained for themselves the bulk of the land, and virtually all of the economically viable territory, including the agriculturally rich areas and the areas with mining potential, it was, in practice, a means of institutionalizing and preserving white supremacy” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000:14).

Segregation therefore, benefitted one group – the Whites, and disadvantaged the others – Black, Indian, and Coloured groups. One may immediately detect a similar situation in the United States of America. But slavery, rather than Apartheid, was the foundation of oppression and racial subjugation. Like the protagonists of ‘State Theology’, early American societies used deceptive biblical interpretations, and scientific racism to dehumanise Black people. Renita Seabrook and Heather Wyatt-Nichol (2016:22) depicts this distortion in the following way:

Biblical interpretations of Genesis 9:20-27 on the story of Noah and Ham resulting in the curse of Canaan whereby all descendants were marked as slaves and of Genesis 17:12-13, 27 that mentions servants bought and established as inheritable property were used to justify slavery. In contrast, a secular approach of “scientific” racism also developed. Physician Samuel G. Norton postulated that different races represented different biological species based upon a collection of 1,000 human skulls. His work influenced a variety of scientists at the time, including Louis Agassiz of Harvard. The positioning of Africans as the “other” opened the door for the institution of slavery.

The dehumanisation and repositioning of Africans as the “other”, as was the case in South Africa, was motivated by political interests. Internal colonialism was imposed on Blacks through legislative actions, of the Virginia House of Burgesses, to institutionalise slavery (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016:22). This meant that Africans would be denied access to the full benefits of society, and that they must be exploited using social institutions for the benefit of Whites. That is probably why James Henslin, as cited by Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol (2016:22), defines internal colonialism as “a country exploiting its own minority groups, using social institutions to deny minority access to society’s full benefits”.

Having been dehumanised and repositioned as the “other”, African-Americans were now set to comply with more legislative actions, which would follow. And indeed, Renita Seabrook and Heather Wyatt-Nichol (2016:22-23) asserts that:

The Virginia House of Burgesses declared in 1662 that the status of children born as free or as slaves is determined by the condition of the mother. In 1691 interracial marriage was outlawed and newly freed slaves were exiled from the colony. In 1705, the ability to serve in positions of authority and public service were prohibited from free African American men. By 1723, voting rights of free African American men were stripped and masters were no longer permitted to free a slave even if he wanted to.

With such legislative actions, Anthony Mitchell (2008:79) states that owning “slaves” became the goal of every European male, rich or poor. In America, Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol (2016:24) notes that “[t]welve of the first eighteen U.S. Presidents owned slaves, eight of which owned slaves while in office”. This is greatly worrying for a country that is supposedly Christian. If United States Presidents owned slaves, how could they have enforced legislative actions that forbade, or at least tried to end slavery? Such was the fate of Africans, in a country that was supposedly built upon Christian principles (DeMar, 2009:2). Its founders used the Bible, and indeed Christianity, to enslave African-Americans, until slavery was officially abolished in 1865 (Haywood, 1948:141; Potekhin, 1964:38).

The abolishing of slavery ignited hope in the hearts of Africans, but such sparks were swiftly diminished. Thus, even though African-Americans were initially promised freedom during the



American Revolution of 1776, fought against British oppression, and again after the American Civil War of 1861-75, such freedom only existed in principle. The Union victory in the Civil War in 1865 may have given some 4 million slaves their freedom, but the idea of rebuilding the South during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) brought with it a new set of very noteworthy challenges. For example, under the government of President Andrew Johnson in 1865 and 1866, new southern state legislatures approved obstructive “black codes” to regulate the labour and behaviour of prior slaves and other African Americans.

Hence the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., with the involvement of other religious personalities, such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME); Jesse Jackson, an American civil rights activist, Baptist minister, and politician, Marcus Garvey, the founder of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Malcolm X, a longtime advocate for the Nation of Islam, still had to fight for the liberation of Blacks (Cone, 1993:9).

The sad reality is that these racial tensions, in both countries, were founded on, sustained, and perpetuated through the Bible, and Christianity or the Church was a vehicle for such tensions. *Eisegesis* was the driving force, which advanced insensible theories for racism, as Christianity was used to uphold divisions, or the church to enforce such ideals. In one way or another, the church was directly involved in the stratification of masses by racial lines. In South Africa, ‘State Theology’ (based on the *eisegesis* of Rom. 13) was used for discrimination. In America, a distorted inference on the curse of Ham to the Blacks (based on the *eisegesis* of Genesis, 9:20-27) was used to motivate racial policies. In both instances, the church was quick to approve of, rather than reject racism as the cause of divisions within the Body of Christ.

The ‘God of unity’, which the church claimed to profess, was suddenly divided into two halves, as the oppressors disputed that God was their strength, while the oppressed claimed that God sided with the poor. Both sides had forgotten the implications of their faith. And the words of St. Paul: “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians, 4:5), were erased by animosity from their hearts. They scuffled for power and control, from which the Whites were a dominant side, and the Blacks subservient.

The Whites regarded themselves as “the true and only chosen people, whom God favoured with superior culture and civilization” (Little, 1998:2). They argued that “God was white, and God’s earthly image was destined to thrive and rule” (Little, 1998:2). The Blacks, on the contrary, were seen as “hewers of wood and drawers of water”, and thus only suitable to be performers of the most menial tasks. and this, by God’s decree (Little, 1998:2). As the final authority in matters of faith and practice, the Bible was used to present the presupposed indisputable ‘evidence’ for racial constructs and to maintain its hierarchy (Little, 1998:2). In South Africa, this racial hierarchy was composed of White, Coloured, Black, and Indian groups, and churches were divided within these racial lines.

Theology of transformation

In order to address the issue of racial bigotry, a new approach is required. This is an approach which advocates for the theology of transformation that rests upon the premise of complementarity. The concept of complementarity, according to da Costa and Krause (2003:3), was first introduced in quantum mechanics by Niels Bohr in his famous ‘Como Lecture’ in 1927. Bohr is said to have regarded complementarity as “[t]he existence of different aspects of the description of a physical system, seemingly incompatible but both needed for a complete description of the system” (da Costa & Krause, 2003:3).

Complementarity, therefore, is a meta-theoretical concept that concedes the factual variables of any one or more objects, which may seem incompatible but are required for the description



of a natural system. This means that in complementarity, “[a]ny one phenomenon could have two complementary aspects in the measurement of its characteristics – as in the wave or particle aspects of light, the momentum or position of the electrons [...]” (Rychlak, 1993:934). Thus, complementarity draws out the variant aspects of objects, which are exclusive but equally essential for the exhaustive description of all experiences (da Costa and Krause, 2003:3).

Firstly, it grounds itself in the principal idea of object or subject variety. This means that complementarity delineates subjective or objective differences between one or more bodies, whether functional or substantive, by intrinsic qualities. Secondly, the concept of complementarity implies the filling-up or making up of lacking existential realisms, in some targeted items of interest, by external bodies (Rychlak, 1993:933). In Biblical lexes, this can be understood in terms of gender relations or dissimilarities. The Biblical narrative of Adam, in the Garden of Eden, accounts of how he needed a suitable companion, but “for Adam no suitable helper was found” (Genesis, 2:20).

Therefore, God created an exclusive entity, Eve, but of an equal significance to complement Adam. Thus, Eve became the variant aspect, both in her measurement (gender role), and characteristics (biological make up), that could complement Adam. In that regard, Eve began to fill-up or make up for what was lacking in Adam – companionship (Genesis, 2:20-24). The concept of complementarity therefore appears to be a viable premise in which to propose the theology of transformation. This is because complementarity does not merely acknowledge or outlines the variable qualities of existence, but adds to them by making up for what is otherwise lacking in targeted items of interest.

It is here, I estimate, where the theology of transformation for the contemporary church could rest. After all, this appears to square with the Biblical message of St. Paul who characterised believers as exclusive entities, but who complement each other as building blocks of the body of Christ (Romans, 12:4-5). As exclusive entities, he urged them to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians, 4:3). In this verse, the very notion of “keeping unity” seems to suggest that there were instances of variance among members within the church, probably as some lacked consensus, uniformity or like-mindedness on certain important matters. Hence the plea for keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

The most obvious incidences of variance, however, within the church related to racial differences. Believers were often classified according to their ethnic backgrounds, gender identities or social statuses, as Jews or Gentiles, males or females, and as slaves or free. But when it came to keeping the unity of the Spirit, St. Paul explicitly stated that “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”, but believers are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians, 3:28). This implies that racial differences, gender identities, or social statuses were not perceived as significant basis for discrimination.

Of course, patriarchy and social stratification were still thought-provoking features of the Graeco-Roman world, but these never hindered St. Paul to proclaim the message of unity in diversity. St. Paul, for instance, informed believers that “[j]ust as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans, 12:4-5). This is the archetypal instance of complementarity, where different entities that are exclusive, are equally required to build up a complete system, that is, the body of Christ.

This theology of transformation, based on complementarity, should have been the message of the church throughout the ages. But somehow, racial differences became a tool to undermine diversity and served the purpose of obstructing the pursuit of keeping the unity of the Spirit in the body of Christ. Outside Christianity, the theology of transformation can be traced from the writings of Bahá'u'llah, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'llah's teachings explicitly stressed that the next inevitable step towards the advancement of the world is the



celebration of the created diversity of humankind. This is the kind of diversity which finds its parallelism in the metaphor of a garden:

Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches, and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof [...] (A Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South Africa, 2001:5).

The exemplified metaphoric parallelism of human diversity with a garden clearly intends to show that diversity should not be feared, rather it needs to be celebrated. As the Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South Africa (2001:5) states, “[d]iversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof”. Racial divisions, therefore, do not enrich nor adorn the body of Christ. Rather they provide an unpleasing sight of the character and created order of God. In the garden of God, all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches, and the trees are not of the same shape and colour. These are diverse and reveal the beauty of God.

Elevating one race over others therefore is displeasing to the eye, and causes division in the body of Christ. Racial diversity should rather be celebrated as enriching and adding value to the body of Christ, as different hues, forms and shapes enrich and adorn the garden, and heighten the effects thereof (A Statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South Africa, 2001:5). It is high time that the contemporary church takes a bold step to unequivocally condemn racism, and declare its position on the issue of racial injustice and discrimination. This is a sympathetic call for the theology of transformation. Transformation, in this case, implies a noticeable change in the manner of conduct or character.

Church unity must not end with the proclamation of the union of God in Trinity, as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. But this unity must also relate to Christ and the Church. And within the church, this unity must exist among the members of the body of Christ. Hence St. Paul insisted that believers are called to unity: “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians, 4:5). Thus, the contemporary church requires a theology of transformation that is based on the premise of complementarity, which does not fear, but celebrates diversity as the beauty of God’s creation, to combat racism.

Conclusion

The problem of racism or racial intolerance, both in South African and the United States of America, requires a durable responses from the contemporary church, if it is to be appropriately addressed. These racial tensions call for unity among the world’s diverse, multi-cultural and pluralistic societies, and the church is not immune to this problem. The church, therefore, needs a constructive approach in which to deal with the reality of diversity. In order to contribute towards that end, this paper proposed a theology of transformation that is largely based on the premise of complementarity, which seeks not only to promote but celebrate diversity as the beauty of God’s created order.

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