



A Critical Analysis of Affirmative Action in South Africa: Theological and Educational Perspectives

Dr Doniwen Pietersen
Education Studies

Faculty: Education, Sol Plaatje University
P.O. Box X5008, Kimberley 8301, Republic of South Africa
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3050-589X>
E-mail: doniwen.pietersen@spu.ac.za

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in social justice action that is deliberate and affirmative to marginalised groups in South Africa. The background to this is framed against a 'Missionary-political justice' or 'missional-political justice' approach, the clear distinctive that characterises missional imperatives that is very clearly related to postmodern South African culture... [and] emerging churches in postmodern contexts'. The use of this approach gives a new wave of interpretation in the field of mission in order to ultimately deal with developments in South Africa generally but more particularly within ecclesiological structures. An adequate case is defended, and the implications of apartheid in the current South Africa necessitate affirmative action as justice and finally an examination of justice and restitution as founded in Scripture, as a fundamental authority is argued. This article brings a missional-political discourse into discussion with the Scriptures as well as practical theology. It also explores the intersections between the theological theme of social justice from theological and educational interactions.

Keywords: Analysis, missional-political approach, justice, affirmative action, education, South Africa.

Introduction

This article aims to reflect on South Africa as a country wounded by the pains of the gross racial exclusion of its native majority, by what was known as apartheid. It aims to do so by a combination of missional-political, socio-theological, and educational engagement perspectives, which brings together scholarship in the area of missions, missions and culture, missions and schooling systems and philosophies, and to a large extent an ecclesiological framework in South Africa (Thinane, 2022). These spheres as well as South African affirmative challenges framed through the lens of social justice are critical because in recent years there has been an increasing amount of literature on the topic of transformation and affirmative action (Alexander, 2007), but from the perspective that it needs to be justified first (Merry, 2020). However, this paper reflects more on an ontological need of social justice that is unapologetic and that is foregrounded in appraising Africanisation and restitution. Van Niekerk (2014) reflects on this from a missional perspective and says the following.

It relates to both the postmodern and the postcolonial/postapartheid contexts, because it refers to the local context of the local congregation, which in South Africa usually includes, if local is not defined very narrowly, a spectrum of communities or residential areas. It stretches from communities or residential areas on a continuum between very rich and very poor, from modern and/or postmodern to ones that are characterised by some or other combination of western and traditional African culture and even, in some areas, Eastern and Muslim culture. The term missional relates to all of these (p. 2)

The whole goal that van Niekerk points to seems to be that the Apartheid system and similar systems were a deliberate and legalised oppression by means of discrimination against people, better phrased as “legally constituted racism” (Klug, 2000:1). This led to a horrendous violation of human rights at all levels of communities, both locally and regionally in South Africa – even within cultures (Feagin, 2013). Randall describes it as an agenda that seeks to “differentiate and separate, by perpetuating inequality” (Randall 1971:11; Metcalfe, 2022). To challenge the idea of van Niekerk and others, Garcia (2002:22-40) states that in South Africa we ought not to be in search for reasons of inequalities found in local communities.

This article is divided into three sections: an introduction, a discussion of various aspects of the demise of Apartheid and how it in essence discriminated against peoples, an examination of the conceptual framework of missional-political affirmative 'just' action, and lastly how missional reappropriation for the oppressed can play out. Finally, the last section offers a summary of the discussions in the article.

Literature review

South Africans are well aware that apartheid laws and structures set in place have succeeded in setting a huge economic and educational gap between the white minority and the black native majority (Coetzee, 2001). This inequality is the sad reality in South Africa because it penetrates the systems of education and the church alike today (Naidoo, 2019). Racial equity was the overarching issue, however, given the structural implementation of this discriminatory system, it was most vividly seen, it stands to reason, in educational reforms (Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Spaull, 2019). But the way this played out was in regions and major cities that were the hub of this flawed decision-making process, which is still felt today. Hale writes

In Southern Africa, legislation concerning race relations first bedevilled missionary outreach in the nineteenth century, first in the rural areas, such as Natal and Zululand, and then in the cities and townships, after indigenous Africans flocked to Kimberley, Durban, Witwatersrand, and other industrialising and mining areas in search of employment, and increasing numbers of missionaries followed them in order to conduct evangelisation programmes and other forms of ministry (Hale, 2010:168).

More specifically to education, how the disruption vestiges of this legacy have deeply infected our educational systems including higher education systems (Du Plessis, 2021), and some of these institutions without credulity have had a tendency, still in the post-apartheid era, to imbibe oppressive political-institutional cultures (Hungwe & Mkhize, 2022). It is to this affect that Cleophas poses challenges and wants to reappropriate when he calls to:

redefine notions of power and narrow the cultural schisms between those on the inside and those on the outside... Such a redefinition is possible through a political-institutional historical exercise (Cleophas, 2021)

Although the Republic is 27 years into its democracy, it is still constrained by the effects of the past, even in many higher educational institutions (Gutek, 2022). The effects of this kind of discrimination meant that 70% of the country's population was left impoverished; uneducated; living in informal non-sanitised settlements and or rural areas on the outskirts of civilisation (Mthiyane, Wissink & Chiwawa, 2022).

Because attaining independence from this phenomenon requires introspection of a different sort, that is steeped in understating the difference between colonialism and its facets that really had various aspects of destruction. These are *epistemicide*, *linguicide* and *culturecide* (Omanga, 2019; Le Grange, Du Preez, Ramrathan & Blignaut, 2020). If this were to be challenged, it may result in animosity because it is deep rooted, as explained by Kgatla in his

assertion that true transformation of a colonial past needs to be both transformative and emancipatory.

Transformation of both the individual and the community is part of restoring wholeness to people. Only with transformed hearts can people extend God's justice to the poor, orphans, and widows, and partiality to all. These concerns were exhibited in the lives of those who resisted the evil of apartheid and embraced a theology of life that would eventually emancipate them. In many respects, they stood where the church was supposed to stand and became a manifestation of God's kingdom (Kgatla, 2013:128)

The viewpoint of Kgatla intersects with how the church was an instrument that filtered down to disempowerment in how it connected with the previous school systems and how it was abused. If one were to examine the framework in which blacks were shaped, it becomes necessary to comprehend how apartheid affected them at Bantustan colleges (Muthivhi, & Mudimeli, 2022). This was done instrumentally and incrementally to achieve all the ends. So, from a postcolonial perspective black ontological frame have been denied, and missional churches that became more organised must recognise that they had a hand in this and that there are people who have been oppressed during the years of the Apartheid government through legislation (Farisani, 2014; Baloyi, 2020), and various laws were put in place in order to emancipate themselves. Nonetheless the negative effects are still felt (Marumo, 2018).

Therefore, any transformative aspects to redress in the church in the first instance, and then on the level of education, need to be considered thoroughly and mainly because these permeate through all life of all who were disadvantaged in all aspects of life (Kumalo, 2005; Makoelle & Makhalemele, 2020).

Demise of Apartheid on the Discriminated

In 1989 a huge step toward the fall of apartheid was seen through the hunger strike of detainees and the mass democratic movement's defiance campaign during the final 'all white' elections (Coleman, 1998:139-142) which saw the final collapse of apartheid in the 1994 all-South African non-discriminatory free elections. And in terms of the development of educational reforms, a notion of education being linked to social upliftment and the overall socioeconomic status of marginalised groups began to take shape (Fataar, 1997). This became the key to starting an overall well-being of educational reforms because a new dawn became clear in the sense that the new elected government did away with apartheid laws by establishing a new constitution that gave birth to a Bill of Rights that 'enshrines the rights of all in our country and affirms the democratic values of equality and human dignity' (RSA Constitution, 1996), in which education was. Particularly pertaining to equality, point 2 of chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights states:

Equality included the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote this achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance the person or categories of people, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination, may be taken (RSA Constitution, 2020, Chapter 2: Bill of Rights, adopted in 1996).

Here lies not only transformative action coming out of apartheid for all HE faculty members who are willing to reflect on their practise, giving agency and social transformation in the South African Higher Education foundation for affirmative action (Henderson & Sabharwal, 2022). So, from oppression, inequality, and separation, there has been a move toward a just South Africa, one that is free and advocates for equality and unity (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2020). The way this ought to work out is in the following way:

Although higher education institutions must debate and make choices and decisions on numerous issues, social equity and redress are not

so much choice issues as they are pressing constitutional obligations that “must be fulfilled”, and societal imperatives in terms of which institutions must take “measures” to “advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination”. (Badat, 2008)

Missional-Political Affirmative 'just' action

According to the African National Congress (ANC), one of the most difficult questions that the Constitution Committee was faced with was how to tackle the huge inequalities left behind by apartheid. The answer was affirmative action. It was the ANC who put affirmative action on the agenda. The time was the middle 1980s, the context preparation for change. One of the toughest questions facing the Constitution Committee, formed under the leadership of Oliver Tambo, was how to deal with the enormous inequalities created by apartheid (Bell, Ncayiyana, Sholomon, Goel, Zuma & Emch, 2022).

The government saw it fitting to introduce affirmative action as a means to balance the inequalities of the country and so reverse the effects of apartheid, including what was happening in churches. Affirmative action is the concerted ‘assiduous efforts to combat decision making based on race rather than any form of special consideration or preferential treatment’ (Kaveny, 1996: 286), in terms of economic empowerment, this is a corrective measure procedure through the heart of reconciliation seeking true unity and equality (Onwuegbuchulam, 2018; Prinsloo, 2019). This is justice in action.

This has required that the church think critically and creatively about its mission and ecclesiological identity. The document, however, does not function as a new beginning for missional thought in the church (Botha and Foster, 2017:2).

It is important to reaffirm that Apartheid was an injustice to the native black majority, and after it ended, it left its victims to live out those injustices across spheres of society, as well as inform ecclesiological identity. Wehmeier. et al. (2010:813) make it clear: 'Justice is the fair treatment of people.' This is what a missional-political approach would consider if it were to address the South African past injustices that would be a combined requirement from an ecclesiological and government imperative, that seeks to achieve in implementing affirmative action (Maphaka, 2021). This is to further the intellectual and economic freedom for the previously oppressed across communities in general, but more specifically on a church level (Allais, Cooper & Shalem, 2019). Some things that can be done by the church can be expressed in the following arenas: 1) Economic Empowerment: Churches can support economic freedom by fostering entrepreneurship and providing resources for community members to start and sustain their businesses. This can include offering mentorship programs, access to capital, networking opportunities, and business training. By promoting economic independence, churches can help break cycles of poverty and create self-sufficiency within communities. 2) Advocacy and Social Justice: Churches have historically played a vital role in advocating for social justice. By addressing systemic inequalities and supporting initiatives aimed at fair and equitable policies, churches can contribute to the economic freedom of oppressed communities. This can involve actively engaging in local and national conversations, partnering with community organizations, and advocating for policies that address economic disparities, and 3) Inclusive Leadership and Representation: To effectively promote intellectual and economic freedom, churches should strive for inclusive leadership and representation. This includes ensuring diverse voices are heard and empowering individuals from previously oppressed communities to take on leadership roles within the church. Inclusive leadership promotes equality, encourages diverse perspectives, and fosters an environment of respect and understanding.

From a legal perspective, freeing the oppressed and caring for the disadvantaged is an act of justice. In a text such as Jeremiah 22, we see how God desires that societies function in justice. The cases of the ‘poor and needy’ need to be defended (22:16) and the oppressed needed to be freed, and not only that, but there seems to be an interesting relationship in that

the oppressed are also called the robbed (22:3). We cannot help but be attentive to this connection; the oppressed faced a loss of sorts, so freedom serves one part of justice by giving back what was robbed, the other. Affirmative action is a means to an outcome of justice. This outcome was imperative to allow a racial society like South Africa to 'not just [see] a superficial or partial moral blindness' of a skewed representation of laity and on a minister level (Bhopal, 2018), so that the very identity of the church cannot negatively impact the gospel, and to allow the Christian church to be brought into question. Naude (2017) in his affirmation of this brings a different perspective to this and therefore should be acknowledged. He posits:

... the conditions are for the Reformed tradition to be a positive force for social transformation and justice. The answer is drawn from the following interpretation. It all depends on how Scripture and the main proponents of the Reform tradition are read. This sounds quite simple. It is in fact a much more complex matter because, as we know from the history of interpretation and the specific hermeneutical and exegetical controversies in South Africa during the church struggle of the twentieth century, there are competing paradigms from which meaning is constructed. There are different readers; there are different texts and there are different contexts (p.1).

It is this research argument that the dawn of South Africa's liberation required the newly elected government to change the oppressive laws of the apartheid regime as an initial step to achieve justice (Jansen, 2019). So, new laws gave black formerly oppressed South Africans the legal freedom to now exercise their skills; to be educated in whatever school they please; to open up businesses; to live where they want, and to have the jobs they desire (Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk & Atmore, 2019). This included the attempt to occupy formally white-occupied churches as minsters and laity. But simply changing the law would be an ineffective action (Pietersen, 2021:2). Apartheid 'cut off the legs of the oppressed' to prevent them from being able to walk. Only giving them legal freedom to walk is an unproductive gesture and alone is not justice at all. A change of law and *then* 'some', such as giving the oppressed a set of 'prosthetics', is a more effective act of justice (Leonard, 2018). Where there is historical discrimination, it is only that there be some counteractive actions as a means to a just end.

Missional Reappropriation for the Oppressed

Apartheid oppressed the opportunities of the non-whites by depriving them of an effective development of skills, gave them a nominal education, displaced them to less than standard living conditions. If justice is to be considered and applied to this situation, it would be to put corrective, equalising, measures that would initiate the reversal of this existence by means of *restitution* (Dlamini, 2020). This is what affirmative action does, it affords the previously discriminated a better chance at an equal life to the beneficiaries of apartheid, allowing them the advanced opportunities they had lost out on (Lee, 2020). In descriptive language, it gives that which was lost, or in more words, stolen, back to its owner. As Child (1998) says:

Restitution is a legal concept. It has to do with justice. In Exodus 22 if a person stole something belonging to someone else he would not be sent to prison but would have to pay restitution, usually double restitution. He would have to replace the stolen goat and give his victim a second goat. He couldn't just say sorry but had to make up for the loss (p. 3).

As a just response to the injustices of apartheid, restitution cannot be avoided or even evaded. It has been argued by the likes of Dirk Herman, Deputy General Secretary of Solidarity, that affirmative action has somewhat been ineffective (Hermann, 2009:1). In the government's attempt to prioritise the advancement of the previously disadvantaged majority, it has only managed to create a select black middle class and leaves a much larger black population at the lower end of the income distribution without having seen any of its benefits (Sabol,

Sommer, Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2021). This begs the question; How long will it take for this to proceed?

Concerning the contentions pointed out above, it is important to realise the developmental age of affirmative action, its implementation has only just begun. Affirmative action has only been in place for the past two decades. Duration is not a basis for considering affirmative action to be ineffective (Pellegrini-Masini, Pirni & Maran, 2020). This judgement can only be made on the basis of whether it has more or less achieved its goal, and in favour of this, one could argue that the evidence of the minor elite black middle class is a result of the small beginnings of affirmative action! The black majority still remains in 'darkness' and has not seen the 'light' that affirmative action or its results are supposed to bring, namely a satisfactorily equal nation. Until this goal is achieved and becomes a reality for a significant number of previously disadvantaged people, affirmative action remains justifiable in South Africa (Maphaka, 2021; Yende & Yende, 2022).

Dirk and others suggest that affirmative action has not achieved its intended purpose and instead alienates the white population and creates two opposing sides (Hermann, 2009:4) and the words from an article from the Christian century periodical as 'hardening the racial differences' (Child, 1998:989), this has been said to be a reversal of discrimination against the white South African population. The supposed white alienation for the benefit of the advancement of black population may seem like an ironic contradiction to justice. Affirmative action can be considered unfair to those who are not prioritised by it. This is not to say reverse racism is fine as well, but that justice prevails where no one is excluded. This situation seems to draw a contrast between what it is fair and just (Vally & Motala, 2018). What should the seekers of justice be more concerned about? What is just for the oppressed or what is fair by giving all parties involved equal treatment? The latter is not justice. Justice is not equal treatment *per se*, because that does not work to address and deal with inequalities, but rather missional-political justice within the ecclesiological realm, as well as within society, is *to bring all to equality* by meeting the needs of individuals in a particular context and working to bring them to the same 'standard' as others (Sinwell, 2022). Therefore, this challenges the conventional understanding of what fairness is. Affirmative action can only be correctly deemed unfair if all involved parties are equal, but this is not the case. To ensure that all people are treated fairly, affirmative action says that those who were oppressed need to be treated preferentially (Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022).

Conclusions

In this article, affirmative action addressed as a missional-political and biblical approach was made clear. From the aforementioned scholarship and South African involvement to injustice in the ecclesiological ranks, greater urgency has come to this topic. Most of South Africa is still struggling with the effects of past oppression (Matotoka & Odeku, 2018). Therefore, in the arguments outlined above, I am persuaded by the initial attempts by the South African government to transform all forms of society, including the missional church as it confronts this issue. The significance of this is captured in Welshe (1991) in his declaration:

The struggle against racial discrimination in South Africa, as many have argued, is both theological and political. This is so, in the words of Ben Marais, because Apartheid erodes the very basis of humanity. It is also because the great majority of South Africans have some Christian identity and church affiliation, yet their faith commitments are heavily conditioned by class interests and particular ideologies. Consequently, prophetic Christianity, in relating biblical values to the analysis of society and the search for justice, has divided Christian communities by confronting the established churches as well as the state (p. 27).

This struggle is not a mark of the ineffectiveness of affirmative action, but rather a hopeful glimpse of a better future!

Missional-political justice, as it relates to affirmative action in the ecclesiological and otherwise spheres, is a matter of need and sets out to achieve those needs. But what about the needs of those who were not oppressed by apartheid but are equally impoverished and needy? The 'need' should be at the forefront of affirmative action rather than just race (Moya, 2021).

Affirmative action is no doubt just, but a better question would be could not a more effective model of affirmative action be implemented? This question is answered from Grunchy (2005), who is clear that the church ought to be transformative in its approach to action plans of social justice in the church, so that they can be seen as agents of fairness and justice to the nations, affirming equality and equity of black people in the ecclesiological spheres that are still dominated by mainly whites. He is convinced that:

The mission of the Church thus draws it inexorably into the task of development, which we have defined as: social, cultural, religious, ecological, economic, and political activities that consciously seek to enhance the self-identified livelihoods of the poor. This is not an optional extra for the Church, but is at the very essence of what it means to be the people of God, seeking to be faithful to the missio Dei as manifest in Jesus Christ (p. 7)

Justice is at the centre of God's heart and requires that we approach the needs of our countries with the same selflessness of God. It is crucial to understand that justice is a complicated and nuanced idea, and that different people's perspectives on it from the standpoint of a higher power or religion may differ but are nonetheless significant. However, the fundamental idea of looking for justice and putting the needs of our nation above one's own aligns with the principles of many religious teachings and can help build a society that is more equitable and just.

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