Racial Diversity and Social Cohesion in South African Theological Education

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Abstract
In our post-apartheid South African society, church denominations have gone through the process of reformulating their identity and have restructured theological education for all its members resulting in growing multi-cultural student bodies. These new student constituencies reflect a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and theological commitments and represent the diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, age and sexual orientation. The articulation of diversity and how people experience it is often highly charged simmering with all sorts of resentments and half-understandings. These issues of diversity are theologically complicated and contested as they are attached to religious dogma. Diversity exists as a threat and promise, problem and possibility. This article is a discussion on the idea of diversity and the management of racial diversity in theological education showing that it has real potential in offering a Christian intervention towards social cohesion in post-apartheid South Africa.

1. Introduction
In our post-apartheid South African society, church denominations have gone through the process of reformulating their identity and have restructured theological education for all its members resulting in growing multi-cultural student bodies. These new student constituencies reflect a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and theological commitments and represent the diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, age and sexual orientation. These issues of diversity are theologically complicated and contested as they are attached to religious dogma. In dealing with “otherness” educators cannot agree whether the goal is to “understand” or to “convert” or to bring them “into the fold” or to explore the “interconnectedness” (Aleshire, 2009:2). For example, one of the most significant changes in theological education has been an increase in women students resulting in political leverage for feminist theological education that continues to challenge traditional practices in seminaries. This article is a discussion on the idea of diversity and the management of racial diversity in theological education showing that it has real potential in offering a Christian intervention towards social cohesion in post-apartheid South Africa.

Internationally, much diversity discourse and literature link diversity to profit by ensuring more productive and sustainable workplaces (Steyn & Foster, 2008:25). In South Africa though, diversity management has to be linked to social justice if diversity is to work as it aims at a fairer, more equitable
dispensation (Steyn and Conway, 2010:283). However, to begin with: what is diversity? Foster (2002:5) describes diversity, as something which is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of divisions and differences contained within each individual. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. The aim of exploring diversity is to look at the ways in which the said differences are constructed and construed; how their significances shift, how they are operationalised in society and most critically why differences continue to matter. Gilligan (2000:9) takes this definition further by stating that diversity means resisting the homogenising of racial, ethnic, cultural and class differences into uniformity. Gilligan (2000) believes that learning how diverse constituencies use power to control and shape the agenda of theological education and its mission is very critical.

Within theological education reflections about diversity begin with the exploration of theological visions of the theological institution and its education, or more concretely, the responsibility of the college or seminary to the mission of the Church. Seeking to fulfill God’s call for mission and justice intimately involves both communicating the perspectives of Christianity and seeking to understand the perspectives of others to whom one communicates and witness. For Christian theology, the question of diversity involves the following (Speller & Seymour, 2002:2):

- an awareness of theological anthropology
- of God’s work in creating the “children of God”
- an affirmation of the wideness of God’s mission
- a recognition that the faith is itself a community of traditions and practices
- a desire to resist pressure of globalization that amalgamate and commodify people
- an affirmation that each tradition is better understood when it is seen in the midst of, other traditions
- a desire to relate the faith tradition to the contemporary context of ministry

In the context of the United States, theological institutions treat diversity as a matter of accommodation (Cascante, 2010:5). Cascante (2008:22) states that in North America, for example, theological education is still dominated by white-male, euro-centric perspectives which unconsciously, and sometimes consciously mirrors in different degrees the still prevalent racism of the broader culture. In some seminaries, the institutional culture only saw the need
to adapt some procedures in order to respond more effectively to students’ needs or to include some content modules that reflect theological perspectives distinct from those of the dominant culture (Riebe-Estrella, 2009:20). That is, the fundamental worldview of institutions and pedagogy remained the same, while some accommodation is made for those who come from diverse cultures and ecclesial experiences. This approach no longer seems viable; neither on institutional nor on theological grounds. The Association of Theological Schools in the United States, which is a body of about 250 accredited tertiary theological training institutions with the growing number of international students, mostly from non-western countries emphasized, “attention to diversity is not simply a matter of inviting participating, but a lens in the theological school’s essential task of learning, teaching, research and formation” (Gilligan 2002:9). On the basis of the economics, seminaries cannot exist without recruiting students from other traditions. These students cannot be viewed as guests but must be recognised as full participants in the life and ethos of the institution. In responding to changing student bodies, institutions are also called to respond to be transformed and need to reflect this diversity in their teaching staff as well (Foster-Boyd, 2002).

Despite the efforts to increase diversity in theological education during the last three decades in the United States (Cascante-Gomez, 2008:21), some progress – which is by no means enough – has been made. In general, the lenses of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality have been only used as hermeneutical, pedagogical and critical perspectives on the production and function of knowledge in many disciplines. According to Riebe-Estrella (2009:19), no new vision of theological education is being proposed in which differences are lifted and divisions are unmasked. Rather the institutional culture remains one of privileges for those who have held the power to maintain their dominance, making the educational enterprise fundamentally reflective of that same group. What reflects the world of the dominant group is considered normative, while what is different is considered as peripheral and of less value.

In South Africa, there is scarcity of literature on how diversity is managed in theological institutions. One wonders how theological institutions manage to deal with racial diversity while forming students within their institutional cultures, as this kind of socialisation is seen as most formative (Hindman, 2002) and how this serves social cohesion. Social cohesion is understood as a state of affairs concerning how well people in a society “cohere” or “stick” to each other. Moreover, this cohesiveness or “sticking together” is ultimately a reflection of individuals’ state of mind, which will be manifested in certain behaviour; in particular, people in a society are said to be “sticking” to each other only if they can trust, help and cooperate with their fellow members of society and if they share a common identity or a sense of belonging to their society (Chan, To & Chan, 2006:274). One wonders whether the management
of diversity in theological/religious institutions can serve as a model of social cohesion for broader South African society or are race relations in seminaries just the same as other institutions in South Africa? This issue is an important one to raise as one of the legacies of apartheid is a lassitude in creatively dealing with the politics of difference among South Africans opposed to the divisions of the past. The perverted use of race, ethnicity, culture and group identity to create, nurture and sustain the apartheid monster instinctively causes South Africans to experience a sense of *déjà vu* in the face of multicultural proposals.

There is consensus that racism is still alive in South Africa, well, and in some cases on the rise (Meier & Hartell, 2009). Despite the remarkable political changes since the first democratic elections and subsequent attempts to improve national unity, there have been mixed and often marginal effects upon intergroup relations. When we look at people, most South Africans still see colour and race first and think of one another in terms of stereotypes. Furthermore, as apartheid structures have not disappeared from our lives, we still, for the most part, live in group areas, still exhibit signs of xenophobia, still do not trust people of other races, still assert attitudes of superiority or succumb to feelings of inferiority, are arrogant or defensive, patronising or patronised, doubting of the capabilities of those of a different race, and we decry affirmative action forgetting that apartheid was a system of affirmative action. Moreover, in the new South Africa, the great disparities in wealth between black and white promoted by colonialism and apartheid still persist. So there is contempt, fear and hatred, on the one hand, and vengeful resentment and hatred on the other. Consequently, attempts to transform our culture from one of separate development to a human rights culture are thwarted by apartheid attitudes. It would seem that we have become content with arguing over how to describe the problem (e.g. is it race or class, or both?) rather than seeking to eradicate it, concerned more with the act of showing our commitment to addressing racism than working to put an end to it. Moreover, an unhealthy defensiveness tends to characterise responses to any critiques that draw attention to the continued problem of racism, resulting in battles that hardly ever transcend the level of personal attacks.

Despite the continuing problems related to racism in South Africa, there are cases, especially in public schools and universities, where few people are talking about race, sometimes even affirming that “we do not have a problem here” (Carrim, 2000:33). So, why would schools and universities attempt to conceal negative racial attitudes? Carrim contends that this culture of denial is related to at least three kinds of fear: (1) fear of losing privilege; (2) fear of continuing with the ways of the past; and (3) fear of civil strife. Another author corroborates this denial of racism by stating, “Whatever the reasons, South African society’s pre-occupation with not being pre-occupied with ‘race’ and racism provides an initial impetus for continued critical research, theorising
and study into these phenomena’’ (Stevens 2003:192). Clearly, continued monitoring of racial attitudes in South Africa appears warranted, particularly among the young tertiary students, who represent the future leaders of the nation and in the case of Christian leaders, the future moral leaders of our society.

Even though it has become unacceptable and politically incorrect for most educational institutions not to take diversity in the classroom seriously, theological institutions need to do more to prepare students from different cultural and racial backgrounds for effective ministry in a variety of cultural settings. In Acts chapter 10, Peter faces a dilemma of the “other.” In the scripture, Peter was chided by his master who said, “What God had made clean you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15b). In this scripture, Peter was faced with the painful task of embracing diversity as he witnessed to Gentiles. The strange dream challenged Peter to rethink his traditional dietary habits and to risk the reinterpretation of what he had accepted as part of his religious formation and obligations. In a similar manner, attempts at diversity in theological education are fraught with risk in rethinking what traditional boundaries must be transgressed to prepare effective Christian leaders.

Indeed, we live in a deeply racialised society more than ever before, to quote Allan Boesak “we are not a post-apartheid society, but a post-racial society” (2011). If anyone should be doing something about our racialised society, they say it is the Christians; as their religion calls for it and their faith gives them the tools and the moral forces needed for change (Christerson, Edwards & Emerson, 2005). Religious organisations are mediating institutions between the private and public spheres (Smith, Stones, Peck & Naidoo, 2007). As such, churches and theological institutions have the potential to draw people out of their private, racially segregated lives, into a social space where human interactions are more intimate than the public arena. The new interracial relationships that are created in these organisations can become a model for South African society in the future. However, the reality in far too many cases is that “churches, the presumed agents of reconciliation are at best impotent and at worst accomplices in strife” (Volf 1996:36). Church congregations should be by definition a place of acceptance and love, but is also an arena for subtle racial tension. The question remains as to how South Africans can un-think old categories of citizenship and refine themselves as a nation, in order to move beyond racial categorisation and their own political bondage. Here one may ask, for example, how the church in South Africa is dealing with racism, what kind of Christians will such a church form, and how are future ministers being equipped to deal with this area of diversity?

2. Race and Theology

Concepts such as diversity, like all signifiers in our country, are highly con-
tested: different people try to imbue it with different meanings. Within theological education, while there is theological agreement that racism is morally wrong and that seminaries need to address the issue of race, there is less theological agreement about how to do it (Aleshire, 2009:2). Theologically some, like the evangelicals, view sin and salvation as personal, stating that racial prejudice is a personal sin. In this theological worldview, the wrongs of racial discrimination are dealt with by looking inward, dealing with individual prejudice and can be solved by the repentance and conversion of the sinful individuals at fault (Emerson & Smith, 2000:48). This approach comes from relationalism (a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships) derived from the belief that human nature is fallen and that salvation and Christian maturity can only come through a personal relationship with Christ. Other traditions see sin and salvation as having deeply social dimensions. Racial discrimination is more than the sum of the personal prejudice - it is a function of power, class and systems of domination. In this theological view, social systems and structures must be addressed, which if corrected, will impact the effects of personal, racial prejudices, whether or not individuals get more righteous.

Given the last statistics on religious affiliation, it was found that as many as seventy percent of South Africans are Christians (StatsSA 2001) and one can assume that the Bible serves as a norm and moral guide in denouncing racism. The Bible teaches that all are created in God’s image (Gen 1:27) and thus, we are of equal value before our Creator God. However, it is also important to acknowledge to what extent the use of the Bible can become a useful ally in contemporary racialised discourse and the perpetuation of racial identities.

There has been some reluctance in acknowledging biblical stereotyping, the possibility that the Bible is a contributing factor to a racialised discourse in South Africa needs to be taken seriously, for example in the obvious legitimising of the apartheid policy. According to Punt (2009:248), stereotyping in biblical texts forms a constituent part of the backdrop for modern day stereotyping, both in setting an example, but also in legitimating such processes. Overall, ethno-racial discourses remain un-interrogated in Scripture courses due to the privileging of pedagogies that rely primarily on historical-critical interpretive practices (Hayes & Holladay 2007). The insistence on universalism in the name of Christianity often amounts to the eradication of difference in the interest of hegemony of the dominant. These very claims were often the reason Christian churches could avoid dealing in a concerted way, head-on with concerns about stereotyping and racism.

By the insistence that the identity of Jesus followers is defined in the New Testament in contrast to race and through the affirmation of universalism, is party to the notion of race as natural, biological and inherited characteristic, and effectively limits the constructive use of the New Testament in communities of faith and by extension in civil society in their racialised discourses.
According to Buell and Johnson Hodge (2004:251) “the familiar idea that Christian identity renders ethno-racial differences irrelevant provides a problematic loophole for white scholars to deny or overlook the saliency of race”. And though white scholars are now engaging in critical race theory and other theoretical frameworks, unfortunately as long as the early Christian world is organised primarily in ethnic categories of “Jew,” “Greek,” “Gentile,” and so forth, there is no synthetic way to move beyond the “rhetoric of race and ethnicity” that acknowledges ethnic diversity in the ancient world, but does not expose the complicated biases against ethnic groups associated with Africa (Byron, 2012:109). Thus, a pedagogy that is focused more explicitly on engaging or embracing the broad spectrum of ethnic differences that existed in the ancient world is in order, and that is evident throughout the Bible.

3. Diversity Management in Seminaries
One of the primary reasons Christian intuitions struggle with diversity is they fear that embracing diversity will ultimately result in the theological institution’s atmosphere becoming contrary to the faith (Parades-Collins, 2009). Essentially, many evangelical colleges fear that an unintentional by-product of incorporating diversity is that their colleges will become politicised. When institutions do not employ initiatives for diversity or engage in a passive role as it relates to race relations on campus, adverse reactions and misunderstandings among students are likely to occur. As Steele (1995:177) reminds us that “on our campuses, such micro-societies, all that remain unresolved between blacks and white, all the old wounds and shames that have never have been addressed, present themselves for attention – and present our youth with pressures they cannot always handle.”

Moreover, once theological institutions face the full magnitude of diversity there could be a temptation to adopt a “colour-blind” position that shields institutions from differences, rather than help the seminary community appreciate and learn from their experience. This is exactly where the problem lies: a lack of consciousness, of the ways in which institutions are organised, and teaching conveyed that, in fact, holds direct consequences for students, identity and transformation. This attempt to neutralise cultural particularities in an educational environment maintains the status quo creating an ethos that favours the dominant group as the norm rather than the dynamism of unity within diversity (Hurtado 2005:600). Educators who apply this colour-blind approach often try to suppress and gloss over their prejudice against students from racial groups other than their own, by professing not to see colour. Furthermore, what is implied in these practices is the belief that newcomers to institutions come from educationally and culturally inferior backgrounds and that adjusting the curriculum to meet their needs amounts to lowering the otherwise high standards.
To overcome this practice, an analysis of power relations between dominant and oppressed groups is done using theories of critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, antiracist education and critical multi-cultural theories. It assumes that structural social change will result when power relations are challenged (Brookfield, 1995). The reason for initiatives related to diversity is not to ferret out racists, but to examine the unrecognised ways in which power assumptions embedded in institutional culture might disenfranchise certain groups of students (Riebe-Estrella, 2009:19), whether knowingly or unknowingly and undermine the educational mission of empowering students for work.

In “Fighting the Elephant in the Room: Ethical Reflections on White Privilege and Other Systems of Advantage in the Teaching of Religion,” Hill, Harris & Martinez-Vazquez (2009:4) write of the elephant in the room as the complex nexus of systems of advantage, with a special focus on white privilege. Diversity provides the context in which persons are able to challenge their own racial stereotypes and presumptions. In developing models of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices for Christian ministry, Reddie (2010:96) in the UK context, speaks of challenging the unaware white students to reflect on what privileges and opportunities are accrued by the simple fact that they are white. It begins with an acknowledgement of the unearned privileges that whiteness confers. Whiteness studies is an emergent field that examines “white inflections in which whiteness as a form of power is defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented” (Steyn 2001; Steyn & Conway 2010:284). The point of these practices is to conscientise students to the dynamics of difference to challenge assumptions so that difference is not seen negatively but as opportunity to deconstruct their past with all its attendant behaviours (Lee, 2009:21).

In mounting a critique of whiteness, it is important that this work calls for white people to critique their own whiteness as a symbol of supremacy and normality. There is a clear distinction between whiteness as a concept of supremacy, superiority, and normality (when black is counterpoised as the direct opposite of these terms) and white people as such (Reddie, 2010:98). White people may sometimes be prone to collusion with whiteness and be impacted and affected by its strains, but they are not predetermined to be constrained by it. According to Reddie, the liberative spirit of God in which we are all endowed with “free will” is one that enables white people to turn away from the privileges of whiteness (just as men can and should turn away from the privilege of patriarchy and androcentric notions of power) in order to be in solidarity with their fellow black counterparts (Reddie, 2010:98).

4. Diversity issues in the Classroom
In the classroom, there are a myriad of complex interlocking issues that need to be taken into account to engage diversity in a successful and meaningful way. The lens of colonial difference in the classroom begs the question of the power of Eurocentric educational approaches that highly emphasise reason and
individualism. Here one may ask: How do we transcend the eurocentrism of theological education in order to allow more creativity and explore the epistemic potential of truly intercultural learning? How do we develop teaching methods that are respectful of and engage students from different racial and cultural backgrounds? How do we include voices and sources from other cultural perspectives in our reading material?

In order to answer these questions satisfactorily, we need to acknowledge that the cultural, religious and theological knowledge represented in the classroom is not equally valued. Using Mignolo’s terms, persons who come from different places and think from different locations, that is, from different worldviews are not interacting mutually (Mignolo, 2007:490-492). There is a hierarchical of systems and sources of knowledge, with the Western perspective at the top of the pyramid that is consistently affirmed in subtle ways as universal.

Eurocentric approaches are still dominant in the field of theology, and they include both the content and method of communicating knowledge. Whether the theology taught in our institutions is Christian dogmatics or constructive theologies, it still invariably focuses on euro-western formulations of faith and philosophical thought. The very language of discourse that has developed is inherently racialised as white and normative. To challenge this worldview is not only to introduce change but to threaten the very fundamental stability of the educational enterprise (Andraos, 2012). There should be a discussion about maintaining the current theological “canon” and about widening the dialogue to include other voices. This very critical issue is much deeper than simply adding black scholars to the syllabi. It has significant implications for the shape of theological discourse, the redefining of who should be the “gatekeeper,” and should be involved in the “de-colonialization” of curriculum (Andraos, 2012).

Cultural colonisation that involves colonised minds and education systems is a deeper and long lasting form of colonial power. This form of power is more subtle and more difficult to identify, resist and transform. A process of decolonizing the pretend universality and construction of new intercultural knowledge are “understood in the constant double movement of unveiling the geopolitical location of theology, secular philosophy and scientific reason and simultaneously affirming the modes and principles of knowledge that have been denied the rhetoric of Christianization, civilization, progress, development and market democracy” (Mignolo, 2007:463). The dominant eurocentric universality claim must continue to be challenged and dismantled in order to make room for other theological traditions to become included as partners in an authentic and mutual dialogue.

Putting aside issues of power in all the syllabi, pedagogy and intercultural learning, we now focus on a central mandate of theological institutions which
is ministerial formation. This involves ongoing development of identity, of moving towards what may be referred to as their greater authenticity, more authentic identity and authenticity vocation (Palmer, 2000). Reclaiming one’s culture, race, gender and other aspects of identity is part of moving towards greater authenticity. To progress toward committed, internalised, and autonomous racial identity, for example, students need to cross racial borders of learning and growth. Tisdell (2003) believes that in reclaiming their cultural identities, individuals will typically go through the process of unlearning what they have unconsciously internalised. The connection between the “immersion/emersion stage” of racial identity development outlined by Parks (2000) and Tisdell (2003) suggests that a student who encounters the “otherness” may unconsciously be provided with a vehicle for awareness and appreciation of identity differences, particularly around spiritual development. It is important that change, which involves unlearning and relearning certain beliefs and attitudes about different races, takes place. As students meet each other, they reach new levels of engagement either by challenging their development process and forming new values or confirming their values (Parks, 2000). Part of this process is learning from their own histories, reclaiming what has been lost or unknown to them, and reframing what has often been cast subconsciously as negative in more positive ways (Hurtado, 2005:605).

5. Conclusion
Within the theological institution once the institutional culture begins to see its own situatedness, it can begin to shed its parochial and paternalistic tendencies (Foster, 2002:16). This is only possible when “whiteness” or “blackness” or heterosexuality or being male is no longer conceived as the norm and is seen as one contextual position among the many, albeit often carrying with it particular privileges and considerable power. It must be highlighted that diversity should not be relegated to an official space; it must be a part of “ordinary conversations.” In doing this, the ways in which racism has already embedded itself in South African society must be acknowledged. Equally important to recognise that the act of speaking in unchanged spaces is not always straightforward, and is itself influenced by the problems related to how one is perceived in racialised ways in these spaces (Meyer & Hartell, 2009:180). And often it is in the silences, the unspoken word, the invisible signs, that the effects of racism may be understood. Learning to understand the religious dignity and humanity of the other is the first step toward encounter and dialogue. In constructive dialogue, we have to engage the racial and cultural borders, that is, lift up our differences and unmask what has turned them into divisions (Riebe-Estrella, 2009).

At a very profound level, people who do work with these issues are engaged in changing people’s social identities. Because handling diversity in education is so complex, educators need to recognise the validity of differences which will require an appraisal of the educator’s own personal and institutional ideologies
and perceptions, and a frank dedication to facilitate and manage student diversity (Brookfields, 1995). It is not enough to merely train staff and students to understand people’s differences at a superficial level. They need to have a deep grasp of their own social and personal contradiction which requires real soul-searching and self-reflexivity. Fear can creep in and manifest itself as indifferences and selective non-involvement, thwarting attempts at diversity. But we have to grapple with the pervasive attitudes of racism and confront them head-on. Our political history shows that we are a “wounded nation” which has contributed to shaping our worldview - this focus on diversity becomes for some an opportunity for empowerment, healing of memories and re-imagining racial, cultural and religious reconciliation.

Usually if an organisation’s or business’ livelihood is not dependent on diversity, then the motivation and urgency are often lacking. Religious institutions are gifted with the lenses of faith and values and are challenged to identify, reinterpret, and dismantle barriers that prevent diversity. Upon this theological foundation we see the value of a reinterpreted education mission that is committed to the vision of diversity, that cultivates new attitudes that honours diversity, and that willingly creates policies and practices that support ongoing diversity (Speller & Seymour, 2002). Therefore, this becomes an opportunity to “live out the Gospel, institutionally.” It is a chance to fashion an educational environment that can be a space for debate and learning as well as dissonance and reconciliation, and it holds the promise of an emerging new religious leadership that will be an active part of God’s Realm on earth.

6. Notes
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7. Bibliography:


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