

Simon Maimela as Public Theologian of the 1980s and 1990s

Christina Landman

Research Institute for Theology and Religion,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

This article traces the public career of Simon Maimela (1944–) during the 15 years between 1980, when he was appointed as the first black lecturer in the Faculty of Theology at the University of South Africa, and 1996, when he handed over the position as international coordinator of EATWOT, the Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians, to Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Although “Public Theology” was not a current designation during the 1980s and 1990s, this article presents Maimela as a forerunner of Public Theology through his contribution to Black Theology and his influence on public opinion formation. The sources consulted include newspaper reports on his public lectures and involvement in public statements on political situations. His articles on Liberation Theology in academic and semi-academic journals and his inaugural lecture are acknowledged as the source of views that contributed to the political transition to democracy in South Africa; all of Maimela’s academic articles are derived from papers delivered at conferences to which the public had primary or secondary access. Study material on Liberation Theology prepared by Maimela while teaching Systematic Theology at the University of South Africa is cited to reveal his then novel view on feminist theology in particular. The publications of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and EATWOT are investigated to show Maimela’s role in the application of Liberation Theology to the public sphere. The article concludes by summarising Maimela’s role as teacher, public speaker and public opinion former within his own vision of Black Theology as prophetic theology. The part he played places him among the most influential Black Theologians of the last two decades of the twentieth century, and possibly of the first decade of the twenty-first.

Introduction

My foremother meets Simon Maimela

In September 1987 I received my doctoral degree in Church History from the University of South Africa (Unisa). My grandmother, Anna Landman (1904–2005), who was 83 at the time, attended the graduation ceremony. One of the most genuinely religious people I have ever met, my grandmother only had schooling up to Standard 3 (Grade 5), could not speak English, and until that day had never shaken a black man's hand, let alone met a black man who was a professor. At the celebrations after the graduation ceremony my colleague, Professor Simon Maimela, came to greet my family, and extended his hand to shake my grandmother's. After she had shaken his hand and Simon Maimela had moved on, my grandmother whispered in my ear: "Ek hou van daardie man. Hy het 'n oop gesig" (I like that man, he has an open face).

Simon Maimela's open face, that is, his ability to reach out to people and immediately gain their confidence, is probably one of the reasons why he became a successful Public Theologian. The other reasons, of course, are his challenging but human-friendly theology, the influence he exercised over his students, and his visionary participation in society-focused theological forums such as the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). It is with Maimela's theology, his students and his contribution to society, that this article will deal historically.

What is a "Public Theologian"?

"Public Theology" and "Public Theologian" are new additions to the vocabulary of theology, having been introduced post the twentieth century. Although it is an aspect of theology more closely associated with the twenty-first century, "Public Theology" is nevertheless an apt designation for the work of Simon Maimela, one of its forerunners.

In this article, Public Theology, the foundation of which was laid down by Simon Maimela, is defined within the dialogical spaces between "private" and "public", between God-talk as personal religious belief and God-talk as public discourse, between theology as the self-interest of faith communities and theology as a voice relevant to civil society, and, finally, between public theology as making dogmatic pronouncements of eternal value in public and public theology as caring publicly in contexts of societal need (see Graham 2000:6–10; Ziegler 2002:147; Koopman 2003:1).

The aims of this article

From the above definition it is possible to distil three aims of Public Theology; these find reflection in the aims of this article, in which I hope to offer some insights into Simon Maimela as Public Theologian.

The first aim of Public Theology is to bring the needs of the voiceless to the public arena. This article explores Simon Maimela and his writings on Liberation Theology during the 1980s as a means of giving a voice to those who had been stripped of their human dignity by political and gender constructs.

The second aim of Public Theology is to present itself as a site for dismantling the religious discourses that sustain race- and gender-based discrimination. This article, then, examines Simon Maimela's contribution in shifting the power discourses prevalent in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s, when he was professor at Unisa.

The third aim of Public Theology is to deconstruct these harmful religious discourses and rescope them as healthy societal practices that will bring healing to those who suffer discrimination and are deprived of their human dignity. This article will describe Simon Maimela's role in the ICT and EATWOT in leading society towards healing in practical ways.

Background

The sources consulted for the purposes of compiling the following brief summary of the life of Simon Maimela are the official CV provided by Maimela for his inaugural lecture in 1987; an updated CV that he supplied during an interview at his house in Monument Park, Pretoria (Tshwane) on 20 April 2010; and newspaper articles such as "A husband and wife combination of brains" in *Lesedi* of Nov/Dec 1981, and "Struggle at last ended in success" in the *Pretoria News* of 20 April 1982, obtained from the Unisa archives.

Simon Sekomane Maimela was born on 14 July 1944 in what was then Lydenburg (Mashishing) in what is now the province of Mpumalanga. As a result of the inadequate schooling available to black people at the time and the early death of his father, he moved to Johannesburg. There he worked for SA Breweries, and completed his matric in 1967 through Damelin, a correspondence college. After again studying by correspondence, in 1972 he obtained his bachelor of arts from Unisa, of which he was to become the first black vice-principal 22 years later, in 1994. In 1972 he married Mabel, a history teacher, and left for the United States of America.

In the USA, Maimela obtained his post-graduate degrees, a ThM from the Lutheran Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota, in 1974, and his ThD from the prestigious Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1978. During the 1970s, Maimela also taught in the USA: at Harvard Divinity School (1975–1977), Boston State College (1977–1978), and Chicago Theological Seminary (1978–1979).

However, in 1980 Maimela returned to South Africa in order to contextualise the insights into Liberation Theology that he had gained in the USA. In 1980 he tutored at the Marang Lutheran Seminary in Rustenburg, and was appointed senior lecturer at Unisa in 1981. He and Bonganjalo Goba were the first black lecturers to be appointed to the Faculty of Theology at Unisa, Maimela in Systematic Theology and Goba in Practical Theology. Maimela was to remain at Unisa for the next 21 years, 13 of which were spent in the Department of Systematic Theology, and the remainder, from 1994, as Unisa's first black vice-principal.

During his time as professor at Unisa, Maimela was co-founder and first chairperson of the ICT (1981–1989) and deeply involved with EATWOT, eventually as its international coordinator (1982–1996).

Maimela pastored in Lutheran congregations from 1968, the year in which he obtained his diploma in theology from the Lutheran Theological College in what was then Natal. At the time of writing, he serves as pastor of the Lutheran Church in Atteridgeville, Pretoria (Tshwane).

It is this combination of pastoring, management and academic skills that prepared Maimela for his role as Public Theologian, and sustained him in this role during the 1980s and 1990s.

The public face of Simon Maimela

Simon Maimela came to the attention of the public when, on 1 October 1980, he and Bonganjalo Goba became the first black people to be appointed to the Faculty of Theology of Unisa (*SA Digest*, 24 October 1980), a fact reported in both English and Afrikaans newspapers (see *Beeld*, 5 November 1980). The sources consulted in compiling this section, dealing with the public face of Simon Maimela, are newspaper clippings, most of which are housed in the Unisa archives.

During the 1980s Maimela was constantly in the public eye, and drew public criticism for his opposition to “white theology”. A letter published in the *Rapport* of 31 January 1982 contained a vehement protest against Maimela’s view, expressed at a theological conference, that the language of white theology constituted theological rhetoric aimed at ensuring white political survival. The writer of the letter wrote: “Terme soos ‘wit teologie’ is uiters misplaas en nog een van die foefies van die verwarringsteorie van die linkses waarsonder ons kan klaarkom.” In referring to the designation “white theology” as a leftist theory aimed at confusing people, the writer of the letter gave expression to the shock experienced by white society at having their theology, which they had regarded as universally valid and God-given, termed “white”.

Later that year, the *Cape Argus* of 24 June 1982 reported on Maimela’s address delivered at a South African Council of Churches conference, during which he stated:

(I)t is a sin against God that blacks have been sentenced to a life of poverty, underpayment, overcrowded and crime-ridden townships, humiliating life in single hostels, and other legalised dehumanisations. All people who have experienced the spirit of Christ have a duty to call for a new society and a fundamental redirection of human relations.

This was also reported in the *Pretoria News* of the same date, leading to an avalanche of responses from the newspaper’s English-speaking white readership; most of these, published in the letter columns, complained about Maimela’s mixing religion with politics. Maimela later identified this as a feature typical of contemporary local English spirituality.

The 1980s were turbulent times in South Africa, and on 21 July 1985 the South African government declared a state of emergency. Maimela made himself particularly unpopular in white populo-theological circles when, a month later, he and Goba, together with 36 other theologians from the Theological Faculty at Unisa, signed a document asking the government to lift the state of emergency, release black leaders from prison, and arrange a constitutional conference for both white and black leaders (see *Beeld*, 13 August 1985). In September 1985, the (in)famous Kairos Document was issued by black theologians and co-signed by Maimela. The Kairos Document presented a critique of State Theology, defined as “the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism”, and of Church Theology, the latter referring to English-speaking churches who rejected apartheid, but did not act in response to the realities of the day. The Kairos Document presented as an alternative to State and Church Theology what was then called “Prophetic Theology”, that is, a theology that was a call to action, and contained a message of liberation and hope. Many of Maimela’s subsequent ideas on Black Theology as a Liberation Theology ensued from the theology underlying the Kairos Document.

In October 1985, Maimela’s house in Atteridgeville, a township to the north of Pretoria (Tshwane), was petrol-bombed. This was the fifth house to be attacked by petrol-bombers in the township in a space of three days; according to the *Pretoria News* of 28 October 1985, all the houses attacked belonged to people attached to resistance movements. During my interview with Maimela on 20 April 2010, he spoke of the background to this attack: on the release of a number of pastors detained by the security police, Maimela led a church service to welcome them home, basing his sermon on the prophecy of Joel that our sons and daughters would speak out against the iniquities of society. It was in response to this sermon, directed against then president PW Botha, that the security police engaged in the petrol bomb attack. Maimela was forced to leave for the USA for a few months.

In 1986 Maimela and his family returned, with both the *Citizen* and the *Beeld* reporting in August on a conference held in Pretoria; the topic was the Kairos Document, and Maimela was the main speaker. His support of the Liberation Theology of the Kairos Document drove white church leaders into opposing camps (Nico Smith vs Johan Heyns), with a large number of Dutch Reformed theologians reacting sensitively to the accusation that their theology was white, state-friendly and churchy.

Black Theology provided one of the most important ideological inputs that eventually led to the democratisation of South Africa. During the next few years, while Black Theology fought for liberation, Maimela’s voice was heard predominantly through the ICT and EATWOT, and through his teachings as professor of theology at Unisa, as will be discussed later.

Maimela made the headlines when, in 1994, the year in which the first democratic elections were held in South Africa, he was appointed the first black vice-principal of Unisa. He was 49 years old, and at the time vice-dean of the Faculty of Theology. He was publicly asked what innovations he, as a black person, would bring to education, and his response that his priority as vice-principal was to “Africanise the university” was repeatedly reported in the *Pretoria News* of 24/25 February 1994.

Beeld, *Volksblad* and *City Press* (24 February 1994) omitted this salient detail, merely reporting that when the news of his appointment had reached the Unisa campus, students had begun to sing and dance. The *Cape Argus* reported Maimela as stating: “my priority will be to revise the curriculum and to help re-orientate some of the lecturers at the university.” Not reported in the papers was that, through his theology, Maimela had been Africanising curricula and people for more than a decade prior to his promotion to vice-principal.

Assuming a high managerial position at the university in no way signalled the end of Maimela’s career as theologian. He remained international coordinator of EATWOT until this position was taken over by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in 1996.

What follows is an overview and analysis of Simon Maimela’s contributions as Public Theologian during the 15 years from October 1980, when he was appointed senior lecturer at Unisa, until the beginning of 1996, when he retired from EATWOT. The overview follows the three aims of the article already identified, namely to highlight his ideas on Black Theology as a means of giving voice to the voiceless, to consider him as teacher deconstructing the socio-religious discourses that hold people captive in racism and sexism, and to depict him as a leader in public forums such as the ICT and EATWOT assisting society to reshape itself and adopt healthy societal practices.

Black Theology in the public sphere

As already stated, the primary aim of Public Theology is to bring the needs of the voiceless into the public arena, and the primary aim of this article is to show how Simon Maimela has achieved this through his public expression of Black Theology as Liberation Theology. Three aspects will be examined here: his positive view of “man”, his view of evil as structural, and his view on the incarnation of liberation.

The sources consulted in order to retrieve Maimela’s theology consist mainly of articles published in the prestigious *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, which is probably the first academic theological journal in South Africa to have published the work of black scholars. These articles are the outcomes of conferences at which Maimela presented his ideas to both an academic and popular audience, and are therefore representative of his Public Theology.

Maimela’s positive anthropology: “man” is beautiful

One of the most outstanding features of Simon Maimela’s theology is his positive anthropology, that is, his view on the goodness and beauty of being human. This feature is apparent from the early 1980s, when apartheid was at its height. As early as 1981 the young Maimela, as a new university appointee, published an article entitled “Man in ‘white’ theology”, in which he accused white theology of portraying the human self “as an incurably dangerous monster” (Maimela 1981:27) and of depicting society “as a world in which every human self is the enemy of every other human” (Maimela 1981:31), consequently presenting government “as the only power capable of preventing war” (1981:32). As an alternative to the “totally negative, cynical, and pessimistic anthropological presupposition” of white theology, Maimela (1981:39) presents the notion of human beings as valued creatures, trusted by God: “God believes humans can act responsibly, decide and act maturely in relation to other creatures.” The human response to the value God attributes to human beings is to open themselves to their fellow human beings, who are there to lend a hand, and to accept love and care (Maimela 1981:41). For Maimela, then, people have been made voiceless because they have been depicted as dangerous and evil on the grounds of their race, and their caring voices should be given the freedom to be heard.

This article was followed by another, in 1982, in which the constructive relationship of goodwill between people was extended to that between God and human beings. Theology, he wrote, “is an attempt to reflect critically on, and to express in the clearest language possible, what it means to be involved by God in the divine creative and redemptive process of living” (Maimela 1982:58). The humanisation of theology, for Maimela, means that God creates good human relationships and a healthy society through the goodness of humans; this perspective is repeatedly evident in his work during the 1980s.

The words below, taken from his article “Law and faith in Barth’s theology,” dealing with human and sacred relationships, are quoted for their beauty and impact:

Faith in the Creator and saving God should be a liberating joy which generates confidence that God uses us, our work – though our acts are imperfect – and that, because God employs our works, we are active participants in the creative dynamics of divine love for the care of the earth and fellow humans. Consequently, faith is not

something that should inject fear in our relation to God or to divine law but something that frees our bold, creative constructions of better laws – as we reject any idolisations of created structures of laws that serve only to sacrifice human life (Maimela 1987:56).

Viewing both the relationship between people and the relationship between God and human beings as instruments for creatively bringing out the inherent goodness in people, in the 1980s Maimela presented a theology that was human-friendly and good-willed at a time when South Africans viewed each other as dangerous and hateful.

Maimela's structural soteriology: "man" needs to be liberated from the sin of evil structures

Honouring the Black Theology perspective that sin resides not in souls (only) but in structures, from the beginning of his academic career Maimela emphasised that Jesus Christ liberated people not (only) from their personal sins, but from the evil of oppressive socio-political structures. As early as 1982 Maimela, still fresh from the United States and his encounter with the Black Theology of North America and the Liberation Theology of South America, wrote in an article entitled "The atonement in the context of liberation theology" that Liberation Theology was neither private nor abstract. Salvation, he wrote, is God reconciling us with him through Jesus Christ; however, "it does not only affect our private, pious attitudes but also affects our sociopolitical environment in its totality" (Maimela 1982:53).

This article and his views on salvation as redemption from evil socio-economic structures were reflected in Maimela's inaugural address following his acceptance of a full professorship in May 1987. In his address, entitled "Salvation as a socio-historical reality", he expressed his views as follows (Maimela 1987:8, 10, 13):

The attempt to correlate God's victory with human struggles for freedom, dignity and self-fulfilment is a fairly recent one... (Atonement) calls for the end of poverty and oppression themselves ... (and declares) that every person has the right to freedom, dignity and personal fulfilment ... Liberation theology invites all the people to become creators of their own history ... Sin is therefore a deeply rooted reality in human existence transcending individuals because the collective will to refuse to love is embodied in social structures.

In the same year in which Maimela delivered his inaugural address, his book, *Proclaim freedom to my people*, was published. Using the language of pietism, Maimela criticised the English churches for their plea for tolerance, which was based on a theology that religion was a private and personal matter between God and the individual (Maimela 1987a:12). He furthermore criticised the Afrikaners as pious people who shared his view that socio-political issues have theological implications (Maimela 1987a:21), but who were led by false prophets who believed in a god of civil religion. In opposition to both positions Maimela proposed political action as a challenge and an opportunity "to work with God for our fellows' liberation and freedom until the victory for love and justice is finally won".

Regretting the polarisation between black and white theology in South Africa, Maimela (1987a:69) affirmed Black Theology as being based on "the biblical witness to a God whose justice requires that the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden be set free" (Maimela 1987a:73). However, Black Theology is not a theory or a doctrine. It is a theology of action "to inspire and equip Christians into becoming agents for the transformation of sinful and unjust social institutions so that they could best serve human rights and liberation" (Maimela 1987a:74).

Black Theology, then, was not only a resistance movement, but a movement of positive empowerment; this is a fundamental precept underlying Black Theology from the time of its inception in the USA in 1966 and beyond its introduction into South Africa during the 1980s by young scholars such as Simon Maimela. Maimela himself reinforced the idea of Black Theology as agency when, 20 years after the inception of Black Theology in the USA, in December 1986 a conference was held at the Union Theological Seminary in New York with both South African and American Black Theologians speaking for the first time on a shared Black Theological agenda. This conference was the outcome of a visit by Professors James Cone and Cornel West to South Africa in 1985, during which they met Simon Maimela, Takatso Mofokeng, Bonganjalo Goba and others. The conference was co-sponsored by the South African based ICT and EATWOT, to both of which Maimela had close ties. In 1989 the papers delivered at this conference were published under the title *We are one voice*. In his paper, entitled "What is right with Black Theology," Maimela (1989:156) made the observation that Black Theology is not about resistance only, but about agency and empowerment. Black Theology

empowers black people to take control of their fate; it empowers them to become the agents of their own liberation and the creators of just and humane social structures (1989:157).

Maimela on the incarnation of liberation

In addition to his anthropology, in terms of which people are viewed positively, and his soteriology, in terms of which evil is seen as abiding in structures, Maimela entertained a third theological standpoint that can be traced back to Black Theology, and that is that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is a symbol of God's identification with the poor and oppressed.

In 1993 he explained the tenets of Black Theology in an article entitled "Black Theology and the quest for a God of liberation". The God of Black Theology is the God of mercy who is concerned about the oppressed. Black Theologians, Maimela (1993:59) explains, find it "significant that the God of the exodus is portrayed as the God of mercy". God has a divine concern for the underdog.

Consequently, for Maimela and other Black Theologians, "the incarnation is the event which clearly demonstrates that God is the God who takes the side of the oppressed and the defenseless, the outcasts, the excluded and the despised" (Maimela 1993:60). In the footsteps of God incarnated, then, the church should take a preferential option for the poor. Through the following powerful words, Maimela (1993:60) places God incarnated on the side of the poor, but encourages the poor to take action for their own liberation:

In taking the cause of the oppressed, God thus declared that the divine self is not prepared to put up with the social situations in which the poor and the powerless are oppressed and humiliated ... just as God liberated Israel not only from spiritual sins and guilt but also from oppressive sociopolitical and economic deprivation, God will again liberate the oppressed black people from their personal sins and guilt as well as from their historical structures of evil, exploitation and oppression.

This section of the article could not be concluded without mention of the beauty of Maimela's view on salvation and liberation, neither of which is seen as based on law: the beauty and meaning of life transcend law, and transpire from faith and God's grace. Here Maimela's Lutheran background clearly comes to the fore, as expressed in two articles on the subject of Luther's theology published in the *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*.

In 1989, in an article entitled "Faith that does justice" dealing with Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone, Maimela (1989:9) wrote these words on behalf of Luther: "God's act of justification sets the individual free to do good works in the liberty of the Spirit not to obtain salvation but to serve others freely and out of love."

In 1992, in an article entitled "The cross and the suffering of human divisions," in which Luther's theology of the cross is discussed, Maimela (1992:30) wrote: "The knowledge of the cross of Christ destroys all human hubris and the divinity that is presumed to reside in the so-called superior races. For the cross compels the sinful humanity to discover that all human beings equally live by God's grace which challenges them to forgive and thereby be reconciled to one another."

In summary then, Maimela popularised the views of Black Theology during the 1980s and early 1990s, albeit in an academic way. The views that were brought to the public arena during this time, namely that all people were good, that oppressive socio-political structures were evil, and that God incarnated amongst the poor and oppressed, gave impetus to the fight for liberation.

Feminist theology

The second aim of Public Theology, as explained in the introduction, is to dismantle the religious discourses that promote and sustain race- and gender-based discrimination in society. Having already studied Maimela's role in shifting racial discourses in the public and academic arenas, we will go on to examine the way in which he contributed to the deconstruction of gender discourses prevalent in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s. We will focus on the period during which he taught at Unisa, the sources for this section being the study material that he wrote during this time.

Simon Maimela made contact with feminist theology very early on. During the interview that I held with him on 20 April 2010 he recounted that a number of those with whom he studied while completing his ThD at Harvard University (1974 to 1978) were strong supporters of feminism. No sexist language was tolerated in class, and the women students insisted on being treated equally and inclusively.

The summary of his thesis that appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review: Summaries of Dissertations* (1978:321) reveals that even then Maimela's thinking went beyond inclusive language in acknowledging that people – both men and women – needed transformation in spaces not reachable by law, and that people themselves were to be the agents of the transformation of their worlds:

Because the study arose out of a painful awareness that current notions of law are an inadequate response to the problem of oppression and demonic social structures of our time, the thesis not merely provides an adequate and fundamental grounding of law theologically, but also lays a foundation for the construction of a theology of social and cultural transformation. Such a theology is sorely needed if the Church is to equip women and men sufficiently to become “foot-soldiers” and agents of creative change for the humanization of social structures.

The conscientisation already evident in his doctoral thesis was later contextualised in South Africa when Maimela started teaching at Unisa in the 1980s. Years later, in 1996, Maimela in the foreword to a Unisa publication in women's studies entitled *Digging up our foremothers* wrote that, as a liberation theologian, he had come to realise that the struggle for liberation would become authentic only if it were comprehensive enough to include the liberation of women. This was the reason, he continued, that in 1982/3 he introduced feminist theology at Unisa: “I am still involved in it in a caretaker capacity. With deep satisfaction I see that some of the writers of this book had been my students in liberation theology” (Maimela 1996:foreword). Indeed, his honours class in feminist theological studies included women who later became prominent South African feminists: these included Denise Ackermann, who later joined the University of the Western Cape; Marie-Henry Keane, later Professor of Systematic Theology at Unisa; and Daphne Madiba, who argued for the ordination of women in the Lutheran Church, where she later served as ordained pastor.

What, then, did Maimela teach students in the early 1980s about theological feminism? The Liberation Theology study guide he prepared in 1983 for honours students in Systematic Theology focused on four features of Liberation Theology. It is significant that Maimela classified feminist theology as Liberation Theology, together with Black Theology and Latin-American Theology. At this time feminist theology was not regarded by the greater academic population, both locally and abroad, as an academic field, but merely as a fad, and as stories from suburbia. Neither was it regarded as liberation, but rather as attention seeking on the part of job hunters in theological academia. By teaching feminist theology as an academic subject, Maimela made feminist studies, a subject not then taught anywhere else in the country, available to theology students.

Maimela identified both culture and religion as potential sources of the oppression of women. While women had previously arranged their lives according to the guidelines of culture and religion, Maimela alerted them to current forms of culture and religion that functioned as systems keeping women permanently dependent (1983a:42).

To Maimela (1983a:43), the “falsification of the experience of God” was the most dangerous element of patriarchal religion. During a time when women were still struggling to find inclusive names for God, Maimela emphasised women's unique ways of experiencing God.

Maimela encouraged women to become visible in theological circles. At this time the radical theology of Mary Daly was more or less the only one available. Maimela not only invited a variety of women's voices into theology, but also took the revolutionary step of empowering women to add their voices to the liberation theologies of the day.

It was through EATWOT in particular that Maimela encouraged African women's theologies.

ICT and EATWOT

The third aim of public theology, and of this article, is to describe the way in which harmful religious discourses and practices can be, and have been, rescoped as societal practices that will bring healing to the oppressed. This section, then, will describe Simon Maimela's role in the ICT and EATWOT in terms of the practical healing of those deprived of their human dignity through oppressive structures.

Institute for Contextual Theology

In 1981 Simon Maimela was a founding member of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT). He was also its first chairperson from 1981 to 1989. During this time the ICT, with limited funds, published a number of significant book(lets), such as *What is contextual theology?* (date unknown), in which theology is significantly described as something that people need to be liberated from:

“Theology has become just another subject within our oppressive educational system and more and more Christians today are beginning to feel the need to be liberated from a theology or theologies that are determined and thought out by an academic and ecclesiastical elite.” In its place a People’s Theology is proposed. It is for such a theology – a theology for the people – that Maimela has provided an academic basis, contradictory though this may sound. However, this can be explained as follows.

In August 1983, the ICT convened a meeting of Black Theologians to share ideas on this topic. Since no formal research in Black Theology had been undertaken locally since 1972, the 1983 conference, attended by 50 Black Theologians, earned itself the title of “Black Theology Revisited.” Of the five papers read, one was by Maimela. The paper was entitled “Current themes and emphasis in the Black Theology of Liberation”, and in it he expanded on the notion of a people’s theology as one of liberation and emphasised theology’s preferential option for the oppressed (Maimela 1983:52), describing the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an “effective remedy for the polarization between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the Blacks and Whites”. For Maimela (1983:55, 56) the gospel has a social meaning: “Human restoration through the Christ-event is not separable from the renewal of political, economic and social institutions.” However, ultimately Maimela placed liberation in the hands of the people themselves. Black Theology becomes a people’s theology in that it “believes that one of its tasks is that of teaching people to believe in themselves and in their creative ability to shape and complete the world” (Maimela 1983:60).

Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians

Because of financial constraints, EATWOT was unable to host many conferences providing a forum for academic reflection on a public theology for the people. The first Pan-African Theological Conference of EATWOT was held in Accra, Ghana, in 1977. The second was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in January 1991; the conference proceedings were published in 1994 under the editorship of Simon Maimela, and entitled *Culture, religion and liberation*.

In his own article, “Religion and culture: blessings or curses?”, Maimela concerns himself with the practicalities of being liberated when people – black people and women – are being held captive by cultural and religious discourses that convince them that they are inferior by reason of race or gender, and that the Bible wills their oppression. Maimela, his career as academic theologian drawing to an end, drove the article from the perspective of his “functional anthropology”, as he had been doing as Public Theologian since 1981: culture and religion, he claimed, must become vehicles of liberation (Maimela 1994:29). By citing numerous examples from the Bible and contemporary African societies, Maimela reiterated the message of “doing hope” as he had been doing for 15 years. The oppressed must take responsibility for their own liberation. No one else will.

In this publication, too, Maimela defined the theologies that were prominent in the early 1990s. The first was African Theology (Maimela 1994:2), which focused on the enculturation approach, characterised by the attempt to marry Christianity with the African world-view, allowing Christianity to “speak with an African idiom and accent.” The second was Black Theology (Maimela 1994:2), the theology that in South Africa had focused on liberation since the 1970s. Third, Maimela (1994:viii) referred to the coming of a Theology of Reconstruction, relating to independent Africa: “Africa must now face the fact that the present oppressors and exploiters are their very African people.”

These words were prophetic for the South African situation. The year was 1994, which marked the first democratic elections, and the year in which Maimela became the first black vice-principal of Unisa. It also signalled the end of Black Theology as a liberation theology in South Africa. Through the work of Public Theologians such as Simon Maimela, Black Theology had played a fundamental part in liberating South Africans. With the coming of democracy the question was: What is going to happen to theology now?

In conclusion: past, present and future

When I interviewed him at his house in Monument Park in Pretoria (Tshwane) on 20 April 2010, Simon Maimela expressed his concern that Black Theology had failed to reconstruct itself since the coming of democracy in South Africa: “South Africa has become ugly with corruption, lack of moral leadership, with people getting into nice warm chairs, minding mainly in which circles they move and not how they can serve the people.”

In his view, during reconciliation theology was coopted into a political agenda, as many Black Liberation theologians moved into government. Consequently, Liberation Theology has now degenerated into nepotism, and had spawned a recreated “state theology” that is simply a correlate of “white theology”.

Is this the end of Black Theology? Or will it be able to revive itself and take on new forms that will correct present expressions of oppression, such as immorality, corruption, poverty and classism? And following his retirement, will Maimela be part of the future of Black Theology as academic and Public Theologian?

History may yet provide an answer to the question about the future. Maimela's history, as described in this article, is one of prophetic theology contextualised in academic tutorship, ecclesiastical leadership, and public conscientisation. The future of Black Theology, in Maimela's view, lies in its becoming the prophetic theology that is needed in contemporary times and by a society in crisis. Only the future will tell whether Maimela does indeed become part of Black Theology as the voice of a theology that is critical and public, and turns an "open face" to the needs of the oppressed.

Works consulted

Published works

- Graham, Larry K 2000. Pastoral Theology as a public theology in relation to the clinic. *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 10(1), 1–17.
- Institute for Contextual Theology [nd]. *What is contextual theology?* Braamfontein: Institute for Contextual Theology.
- Koopman, Nico 2003. Some comments on public theology today. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 117(1), 1–17.
- Maimela, Simon S 1978. God's creative activity through the law: a constructive proposal on the theological meaning. *Harvard Theological Review* 71(2, 4), 321–322.
- Maimela, Simon S 1981. Man in 'white' theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 36, 27–42.
- Maimela, Simon S 1982. The atonement in the context of liberation theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 39, 45–54.
- Maimela, Simon S 1982a. Towards a theology of humanization. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 41, 58–65.
- Maimela, Simon S 1983. Current themes and emphasis in the Black Theology of liberation. *Black Theology revisited*. Conference report. Braamfontein: Institute for Contextual Theology.
- Maimela, Simon S 1983a. Systematic Theology. Only study guide for STH407-X (Liberation Theology). Revised 1990. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Maimela, Simon S 1986. The task of theology in South Africa today. *Dialog* 25 (Fall), 281–285.
- Maimela, Simon S 1987. Law and faith in Barth's theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 58, 42–56.
- Maimela, Simon S 1987a. *Proclaim freedom to my people*. Braamfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa: Skotaville.
- Maimela, Simon S 1989. Faith that does justice. *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 3(1), 1–14.
- Maimela, Simon S 1991. Traditional African anthropology and Christian theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 76, 4–14.
- Maimela, Simon S 1992. The cross and the suffering of human divisions. *Journal of Black Theology* 6(1), 15–31.
- Maimela, Simon S 1993. Black Theology and the quest for a God of liberation. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 82, 54–66.
- Maimela, Simon S 1994. Religion and culture: blessings or curses?, in Maimela, Simon S (ed.), *Culture, religion and liberation*. Pretoria, South Africa.
- Maimela, Simon S 1996. Foreword, in Landman, Christina (ed.), *Digging up our foremothers: stories of women in Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Maimela, Simon S & Hopkins, Dwight (eds.) 1989. *We are one voice: Black Theology in the USA and South Africa*. Braamfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa: Skotaville.
- Ziegler, Philip 2002. God and some recent public theologies. *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4(2), 137–155.

Archival works

- Maimela, Simon S 1987. Salvation as a socio-historical reality. Inaugural address. University of South Africa Archives. Quoted with permission of the author.

Newspaper articles

- "Black theologians", *SA Digest*, 24 October 1980.
- "Swart teoloë by Unisa aangestel", *Beeld*, 5 November 1980.
- "A husband and wife combination of brains", *Lesedi*, Nov/Dec 1981.
- "Wit teologie is linkse verwarring", *Rapport*, 31 January 1982.
- "A sin against God's will ...", *Cape Argus*, 24 June 1982.
- "Life in South Africa a basic offence", *Pretoria News*, 24 June 1982.
- "Struggle at last ended in success", *Pretoria News*, 20 April 1982.
- "A'ville petrol bomb attack at Unisa professor's home", *Pretoria News*, 28 October 1985.
- "DRC criticises contents of Kairos papers", *Citizen*, 23 August 1986.
- "Teoloë bly weerskante van die kloof oor Kairos", *Beeld*, 25 August 1986.
- "Unisa appointment a breakthrough", *Pretoria News*, 24 February 1994.

“Black gets top Unisa post”, *Pretoria News*, 24 February 1994.
“Prof Maimela Unisa se 1ste swart vise-rektor”, *Beeld*, 24 February 1994.
“Unisa kry sy eerste swart vise-rektor”, *Volksblad*, 24 February 1994.
“Unisa needs to be Africanised”, *Pretoria News*, 25 February 1994.
“Unisa picks Maimela for top post”, *Cape Argus*, 28 February 1994.
“Top job for professor”, *Natal Mercury*, 1 March 1994.
“Unisa appoints new vice-principal”, *Natal Daily News*, 2 March 1994.

Interview

20 April 2010: Landman and Maimela at his house in Monument Park, Pretoria (Tshwane).