

**Simon Maimela in the chamber of African Theology:  
a methodological challenge!**

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*Abstract*

Reverend Professor Simon Sekone Maimela's contribution to the South African theological discourse is remarkable. He has published widely in the field and managed to weave his Lutheran studies into Black Theology debates and discussions. His book entitled: *Proclaim Freedom to my people*, speaks to the heart and discusses liberation in the heat of socio-economic and political struggles during the apartheid era in South Africa. There is no doubt that Maimela successfully formulated significant theological postulates at the time. This article aims to engage with Maimela at the centre of the dialogue about African Theology and Black Theology. The article recognises the *ex ante* debates that were largely sparked by the paper published by Reverend Dr Manas Buthelezi and in which he analysed and highlighted shortcomings of what he called the "ethnographical approach" of practicing theology in Africa. Instead Buthelezi opted head on for the "anthropological" approach given its existential focus and structure, dealing with the current issues and realities that confront humanity. According to Buthelezi, the "anthropological" approach is both *urgent* and *agitating* and is different from the "ethnographical" approach. It is evident that Maimela was part of the team of Black Theology scholars in South Africa that pioneered the course for Black Theology and had to engage with this "classic" debate: whither "anthropological" theology, whither "ethnographical" theology? The article introduces what could

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be termed the closing phase of Maimela's active *theologising* in engaging the subject under discussion. The article argues for a recast of the current theological method applied to research and teaching at seminaries and universities.

### **Introduction**

We had the privilege of working closely with Reverend Professor Simon Sekone Maimela in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Central Diocese, specifically in the Pretoria Circuit. Maimela spent the last five years that led to his retirement serving the church on a full-time basis at the Atteridgeville parish. Ironically, he first served the Atteridgeville parish when he came to Pretoria in the eighties – at the time employed at the University of South Africa, in the Faculty of Theology. Clearly our generation came into the last slide of his life in the church and in our various personal capacities we were privileged to have worked with Reverend Maimela in the circuit of Pretoria. We recall the day when he approached us about the request to rejoin the church as a full-time pastor. Maimela was immediately invited to present himself to the circuit council and to further substantiate this request. The outcome was positive. We then looked forward to engage and relate with him, a sound professor of theology. The challenge that we personally carried through was how to manage this theological *guru* who was to serve as a pastor in the circuit on a full-time basis. To our surprise, we found in him a humble person blessed with insight. When he retired in 2009 having turned 65 years, we looked for better ways to mark his outstanding service to the church. There were a number of ideas that took shape. We mention two of these. Firstly, there was the undertaking of a trip to the *Luther-städten* (cities related to Luther's life) during the three decade celebration of our circuit's partnership with the Nienburg *Kirchenkreis* in North Germany. The latter idea was necessitated by the fact that beside Maimela's being a Luther scholar, he had never been to the *Luther-städten*. The second idea was to have a *Festschrift* published in his honour. Regrettably, only the first idea materialised. One was not aware that this idea would turn out to be a real *theologising* journey – imagine two weeks of intensive debates, exchanges and discussions with Maimela.

The three-day Wittenberg trip was very interesting. We recall Simon Maimela having had to relate his past studies on Luther to the Luther heritage museum in Germany. At the Luther house, where the main entrance door faces the theological school, there are two brick-built seats. We were informed by the tour guide that the seats were used by Luther and Katharina for intimate exchanges. The tour guide asked us who wanted to act out Luther and Katharina. We remember Simon Maimela jumping and grasping the

opportunity; he became our Luther for that particular day. We spent the entire day laughing about these two roles – *the Luther and Katharina conversation*.

Throughout our theological study we have always had the nagging theological concern of *how* African Theology and Black Theology should be integrated. Both theological trends are based on the African situation but differ in terms of their methodological postulates. One recalls when Desmond Tutu (1978) asked, “Whither African Theology?” Tutu aimed to plead for some meaningful coexistence and mutual enrichment between these two trends of African Theology. During our trip to Germany with Reverend Maimela, we used the opportunity to engage with this specific topic that has remained critical to us.

This article aims to situate African Theology or Theologies and engage with Maimela on the subject.. We shall apply the method of close personal interviews with Maimela to attempt to elucidate the specific topic under discussion. The article argues that recently there has been some gradual development of African theological reflections in Maimela’s *theologising*. In this regard, the article argues that Maimela attempted to find a methodical way that would ensure a meaningful dialogue and engagement between these two trends of theological discourses. As Maimela (1991) rightly maintains, “the debate between the two camps, largely based on misunderstandings, raged for many years.”

### **Constructing the context of dialogue**

Since the beginning of 2005 Maimela returned to the ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Central Diocese in the Pretoria Circuit on a full-time basis. Our interest and expectation were to see Maimela post UNISA – and for that matter Maimela at the verge of his retirement. One of the critical areas on which we focused our engagement with Maimela was his views on simultaneously being a Lutheran and an African. We recall his impromptu debates on the latter discussion. It was very clear that Maimela had unfinished theological business in this regard. There is no doubt that his previous publications took a slant towards the “anthropological” side of African Theology – thereby referring to Black Theology. Maimela meticulously defined the Black Theological discourse as the theology that actions, relevant positions, articulates, and interprets the discourse of Christ in a specific situation, with specific time and purpose for liberation and change. Surely the publication *Proclaim freedom to my people* (1987), completely addresses this subject on the anthropological approach. We had a strong conviction that Maimela had not settled well with the notion of an “ethnographical” theological approach. In our interviews with him (Maimela), he could not elaborate further on this change of or positioning on the subject under discussion, but instead insisted that we should read his key

note address given at the EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) Pan African Theological Conference, in Harare, 6 January 1991. The address was titled: *Religion and culture: blessings or curses?* In his address, Maimela (1994) aimed to find a middle ground between two camps of African theologians: the “enculturation” approach versus the liberation approach. According to Maimela (1994), the debate between the two camps was “largely based on misunderstandings that raged for many years” – and strongly maintained that the “struggle for liberation is all-embracing” (1994). He pleaded with the conference as follows:

In a very important sense, the theme for our conference tries to bring together the two African approaches to theology, by linking African cultural and religious expressions to African struggles for total liberation from all forms of human oppression ... reinforces the hope that African theologians should be able to find one another and work together because total liberation is a first priority for all Africans, regardless of whether they live in so-called independent Africa or Apartheid South Africa. There is therefore no excuse for us to continue living in our splendid theological isolation from one another: thus allowing our detractors to mislead us into believing that socio-political and economic liberation is more important than cultural liberation (Maimela 1994:4).

Unfortunately, as Maimela concluded his address, he noted difficulties in integrating these two camps. This is a serious challenge!

#### **How did all this start?**

Buthelezi (1973) in his article entitled *An African Theology or a Black Theology*, pursues the debate around the theological approach differentiation between African Theology and Black Theology – in search of a credible theological enterprise that grapples with the existential situation – a theology of action and relevance (Motlhabi 1973:80). This reminds one of the critical issues raised by John V. Taylor (1963:24) who summed up this challenge as follows:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European worldview, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? If

he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal? And if Africa offered him the praises and petitions of her total uninhibited humanity, would they be acceptable?

For Buthelezi (1973:30) the above issues and thought-provoking questions raised by Taylor point to the essence of the quest for a Black Theology “or, to use a more established phrase, “African” or “indigenous theology”. Clearly Buthelezi’s analysis straddles between “Black theology” and “African theology”. As he argues, “It is possible to distinguish two approaches to indigenous theology in South Africa: the ethnographic and the anthropological.” For Buthelezi the distinction centers “on whether the point of departure in our theological method should be an ethnographical reconstruction of the African past or a dialogue with the present-day anthropological realities in South Africa”. Buthelezi questions the validity of an ethnographic reconstruction as a point of departure in the method of *theologising*. He (Buthelezi) observes what he terms two “disturbing” features of this approach. Firstly he observes the *tendency towards cultural objectivism*. Here Buthelezi (1973:32) argues that,

Too much emphasis is placed upon the African world-view as if it were an isolated and independent entity apart from the present anthropological reality of the African man. The quest for an indigenous theology seems to be understood as originating from the problem of a conflict between two world-views: the European and the African”. For Buthelezi the latter approach “becomes a problem of epistemological entities; fixed impersonal data – things “out there”, namely, the body of categories for interpreting the universe.

Secondly he considers the *tendency to overlook present-day realities*. Here Buthelezi (1973:32) laments the propensity of the ethnographical approach to romanticise the “ethnographically reconstructed historical situation at the expense of the anthropological dynamics of the present situation”. In this regard, Buthelezi (1973:32) does not cast any shadow of doubt on the potential of the past, arguing that it can serve as an important instrument for inspiring man in his present-day responsibilities. “Looking back to the past, served as a catalyst in the lasting achievements of the Renaissance and Reformation movements”. Then Buthelezi (1973:33) argues that, “(f)or theology to be indigenous, it is not enough that it should deal merely with ‘African things’ like the African world-view; it must also reflect the life dynamics of the present-day African.” Then Buthelezi proceeded to postulate

his understanding of the anthropological approach. Buthelezi (1973:33) sees the starting point of the approach as reflection on the existential situation in which the

gospel finds man. Just as one needs to take man's sinful state seriously in order to grasp the depth of the forgiving love of God, one must also take seriously the decisive factors that shape the mode of man's daily existence in order to see in perspective the direction as well as the ultimate fruition of the formation of the new man in Christ through the Word of God.

In addition to this discourse, Buthelezi (1973:33) offered the following analysis of the theological meaning of blackness :

Blackness is a life category that embraces the totality of my daily existence. It determined the circumstances of my growth as a child and the life possibilities open to me. It now determines where I live, worship, minister and the range of closest life associates. Can you think of a more decisive factor in life? The totality of the only life I know has unfolded itself to me within the limits and range of black situational possibilities. Whether or not anyone who observes my life may think that it is too special to be normal is immaterial; it is my only experience of life, and this fact determines the hermeneutical setting for the Word of God which is designed to save me within the context of my real situation.

Clearly the above position of Buthelezi sparked what scholars came to term the "Classical" debate (Motlhabi 1994:115).

### **Where are we?**

The question remains: What has happened since then? What is being taught and researched at various seminaries and universities? Do we have a new mandate for doing theology? One is mindful of other theological developments such as Contextual theology. We have raised all these and other questions with Professor Maimela. All concerns cover not only issues of methodology but go a long way to question the quality of theological training and development, with particular reference to South Africa. A lot has changed since Buthelezi wrote his article in the early seventies.

It is very clear that targets have changed and this should necessitate a change in shooting range. The shape and size of the enemy have changed. The region and South Africa got stuck in a number of interlocking crises. The

HIV/Aids pandemic remains a challenge. Poverty and unemployment remain stubbornly high. The economic storm clouds are far from disappearing. Crime is not only soaring, but is becoming increasingly violent. There is a pervasive air of public corruption. Efforts to make the public service more efficient have failed. Democratic institutions are battered. It seems we have lost our ability to openly engage in debate and disagree civilly, without angrily shouting, insulting or trying to humiliate each other into silence.

Interestingly racial mistrust still persists. There is a battle, the consequences of which are broken families, communities and individuals. The abuse of children, women and the aged has reached terrifying levels. Communities are paralysed by the feeling of anxiety, drift and foreboding of imminent collapse among both black and white. Society is definitely facing collapse. There is a demand for fresh ideas and a new direction, which appear to be spectacularly lacking. The global financial crisis has hit South Africa's economy and the entire region. A spate of violence and protests by communities across the country against sluggish government delivery of services, indifferent officials and corruption is also likely to continue. There is the emergence of a new "bling" culture that has now thoroughly become a part of the new South Africa, meaning one of getting rich quickly, using shortcuts. Once one has made it one should feel entitled to live lavishly – the "bling" lifestyle. The latter has now become the new standard for achievement – a sign that one has made it. Unfortunately the entire state of affairs leads to a society that celebrates mediocrity. Nobody needs to work or study hard anymore. Everyone is looking for a short-cut to fame or riches.

How should we theologise in this regard? The "new" theological discourse has to take into account this deep crisis of institutional, moral and leadership dimensions. We should have a theological discourse that will lift the gloom. Clearly such a situation calls for change in terms of the current *homiletical and hermeneutical orientations* – outward and inward change when it encounters the Word of God. Such a situation demands an integrated approach and response. Theological reflection has to continue without failure and should allow the Word of God to confront all situations – thereby making it a *living theology*. The Word of God gives life to theology, not the context. The context in this regard remains temporal – therefore the Word of God should remain the anchor of all theological enterprises. This becomes relevant given the long history of our association with debates and discussions on biblical hermeneutics *in the making of theological dialogue*. We do not claim to have made any serious intellectual "dent". Back then we raised questions that pertained to reader response to theory and practice in reading and interpreting the bible text (Masoga 2001). Some of these questions included among others: *who is a critical reader and who is not, the question of text and textual formation, who creates a text, and the question of textuality and textual analysis*. We must admit that each time we raised voices we have not

been taken seriously by those scholars who “claimed” to have occupied the intellectual space of biblical interpretation science.

*Sharing some practical experiences*

The intellectual hegemony existing in theology is difficult to deal with. Our faith orientation has as its basis the South African Lutheranism. We come from a rural family background with a strong South African black Lutheran heritage. We were born and raised in a family where there was “creative tension” between being both Lutheran and African (in the local community sense). Some examples in this regard include having a traditional healer coming home and performing rituals without any problem or fear of contradiction. Within such a rich potpourri of *religio*-cultural experiences, there were community values that were upheld by all members of the local community. The community knew what had to be done and had no open questions about it. For instance, circumcision practices were seen as being no deterrents to one’s faith development, but instead was part of one’s “faith development package”.

Even within such a context there were Sunday school activities at the local Lutheran church – for that matter the only established church in the local community at the time. This should not suggest that there were no “subtle faith formations” in various families that made up our local community. We wish to argue that there were faith “tendencies” – unwritten, subtle, orally based but symbolically acted out. Even within such a background there was no sense of faith conflict. The question remains how this and many other communities managed to handle this creative tension – kids were raised within such a situation – kids were raised to respect and acknowledge the “omnipresence and potency” of God while also noting other life-pressing challenges and commitments. The over-arching nature of the divine was never questionable but instead was “complemented” to make the entire faith structure and practice a “faith-complemented” one.

Further, we wish to draw the attention to the ongoing theologising by a Lutheran group of women (“kitchen ladies”) who began to worship in garages around Pretoria in the late seventies until early in 2007. We had the opportunity of *dialoguing* with them about their faith-challenge issues. These women established what came to be known as “Garage Missions”. There is much one can read and learn about the content of these women’s spirituality. One might well ask what made them stick to their faith? What sustained them? Also taking into account their historical background (apartheid; serving in garage missions; taking care of family back home). We conducted interviews with some who are still working as “maids/servants” and are now integrated in newly established places of congregations in the Pretoria Circuit. Amazingly, they still keep in touch with those who have returned

back to their homes. Unfortunately, the church failed to converse with them in a meaningful conversational theological approach to allow them to speak for themselves and allow them to voice their ideas of who God is and how He has been with them.

In addition, given the current integration problems facing the region, in particular South Africa and Botswana, there is an apparent lack of the theological instruments to address this. It is necessary for the church to produce a theology that addresses foreigners. We recently witnessed with dismay church's unstructured and unfocused response to the xenophobic attacks meted out at Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Somalis, and such in various townships of South Africa – predominantly in the Gauteng province. The funeral of Mr Pako, an illegal Zimbabwean, who came to look for a job having left his pregnant wife and parents behind, bears reference here. We were involved in conducting this funeral. It should be noted that it took the church some time to respond to the plight of a young brother wishing to transport his dead brother (Owen Pako) back to his home country. The report was publicly announced on the local radio station and the dean of the circuit was alerted of the man's plight. The circuit council was informed, a decision was reached and an amount was made available to help cover funeral costs. The funeral undertaker managed to "legalise" the status of the deceased. One recalls that the funeral had to be conducted on a Friday just before the undertaker delivered other "legal" corpses to their respective homes in preparation for burial the next day. This particular corpse had no home and could not be delivered anywhere. Therefore the entire funerary rite was conducted at the mortuary. We even assisted with the washing ceremony and the pouring of grains in the coffin as a religious symbol signifying that the deceased is travelling from home to home. We had no other choice but to *sacralise* the mortuary for this purpose. Having concluded all the required rituals we moved to the cemetery and we were met by other communities of Zimbabweans – interestingly the majority were illegal immigrants. We did not have enough time to allow the mourners to view the remains but afforded them a minute's chance before the coffin was taken to the open grave. We were touched by cries and frustrations written on the faces of the mourners. Fortunately the father (Mr Pako) of the deceased managed to attend. He had travelled all the way from Zimbabwe to ensure that the deceased is buried. We recall Shona songs and hymns that were sung. We stood still and contemplated the many unknown "Pakos" buried as paupers, unwanted, unappreciated, not remembered. It was a very sad moment. Where is the church in all this?

### Doing theology for power

We are calling for the redefinition of contextual analysis and are able to answer the questions such as *why* are we doing this? What are the limitations? How should we showcase our strengths and weaknesses, map out our context and how have we sketched it? There is an urgent need to begin to situate our theological mode/method. The core of the issue is that we need to start re-opening debates around doing theology. We need a fresh approach – for that matter another way. We need to do *theology for power*, revisiting the question of power and theology with a new context and point out how power influences theology. The following questions become very central here: How much of our theologising is endorsed? Who listens to us? Who dialogues with us? Do institutions of learning have the credibility of communities of faith-practice? Have margins of doing theology shifted? What shifts them? Why are they shifting? How should we do theology now? Should it centre around colour? What should it be called? How should we minister nowadays? Is there a theological discourse that can speak to all South Africans? By doing African theology are we not limiting the presence of God in every possible situation and the ways in which God is encountered? Shouldn't we avoid any measure that would limit God?

There is a need for researchers to be truthful about themselves and about the position from which they speak. The fact remains that we are self-sufficient – language and method wise! There is a need to differentiate between context and space. How much space do the alternative voices have? By space, we mean the privilege of pen and writing, the comfort to think through things, the privilege to dialogue as if one is in a chamber, the privilege to think through ideas and ultimately pen them down, the privilege to articulate voices “clearly” the privilege to sell their thoughts, the privilege of time. The so called “alternative” voices are still part and parcel of the mainstream economy. They support the economy and contribute to the major infrastructure, sub-standard or not. Our doing theology, our reflection on these voices should be put to the test without making this a power issue. They are in the economy but they are not part of it. For them survival becomes the issue. And that's the only thing they can focus on. Therefore the meaning of life is about survival – but they are not free from the economy. It cripples them. They are crucified within the mainstream – especially within South Africa. This then becomes a cycle of crucifixion on a daily basis.

The task of doing theology has to remain *under the cross* – the same holds for the task of church mission. There is no church that has not suffered. Before the lot of the poor and the ignored rubs off upon the church, it still ministers to the poor from the high echelons of its establishment. As Jesus says: “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

On the other hand Hans Kung (*On Being a Christian*) mentions *outstanding questions* in his treatment of the church's involvement in society. For Hans Kung the individual Christian must take a stand on all outstanding questions. The church as community of faith and its representatives must not, cannot and may not take a stand on *outstanding questions* (my emphasis). The church and its representatives may, should and must take a stand publicly even on controversial social questions where, but only where it is empowered to do so by its special mandate: wherever and as far as the Gospel of Jesus Christ itself (and not just any sort of theory) unambiguously (and not only obscurely) demands this.

The question remains: *Can theology say all that needs to be said?* The theology under the cross places *question marks* over all systems and structures that aim at incarnating even the best of our ideals and intentions. This simply means that every effort by human beings, including that of the church, at being *the salt of the earth* should be continually subjected to the critique of the Word of God (*Sola Scriptura*), failing which, sooner or later it becomes only a *mirror image* of the sinful scars of the community it serves.

#### *On seeking the sense of theological meaning*

Currently the task of theologising is facing many challenges and in a sense it becomes exciting! Some of these are local, regional, continental and even global. All challenges point to a theological enterprise that should continue to grow and strive to find new meaning.

#### *The need for theological assessment*

The theological should be able to answer the question: *Who are we?* No theology committed to the development of effective ministries can avoid dealing with its context and identity. Theology has to continue to examine and understand forces that bring about divergence from the course of the Gospel. In this case no theological enterprise can live for itself but should always be vigilant, confronting many odds such as: illiteracy, malnutrition, poverty, and such. Therefore there is a need to develop a more critical analysis of our situation. Our situation has been for a long time defined *from the outside*. Outside inputs include liturgical formulations, prayer formulae, hymns, policies, non-equipping; transforming decisions, and strategies. The language of theological analysis has been distorted so as to confuse the church about confronting real issues.

*On the new self-understanding of any theological task*

Metz makes a significant contribution in his notion of the *socio-critical function process*. This kind of approach brings about *a new self-understanding*. It changes the inner attitude and furthermore subjects its theological formulations to critical scrutiny, challenging doctrinal rigidity, as Metz (*The Church Social Function in the Light of Political Theology*) puts it:

This function of social criticism is therefore bound to have a repercussion on the church itself. In the long run it aims at a new self relationship with modern society.

*Theology is missional*

There is a need for theology to reflect on its *missional* task both as a gift and calling. The following question will remain with us for centuries: *How is theology to give relevant expression and faithful embodiment to the Gospel?* One wishes to submit that theology's *essence is missional – for the calling and action of God forms the identity of doing theology*. It becomes important for theology to remain within the *kurios* mandate while reading the signs of times (the *kairos*). We are given a sense of meaning and purpose only through God and by his unfading mercy and grace. This surely puts the centrality of God in the life of the *Corpus Christi*. The divine power-sensed ministry presents God as the most accessible God – God who listens and speaks to his people. In Christ, God has disclosed himself as a God who is full of the redeeming love. The cross of Jesus Christ indicates that God is unconditionally committed to our well-being – he provides us with comprehensive well-being. One will agree with us that it is written in his Word that we meet the loving, gracious and redeeming God. It is in his Word, Luther says, that we meet the true God. In this case the proclaimed God (*Deus praedicatus*) is the God incarnate in Christ (*Deus incarnatus*), the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*) and the “naked” God (*Deus nudus*). God reveals himself powerfully in our various experiences of life – thereby becoming the hidden God in the experiences of life (*Deus in vita*).

*Continuous reading of our situation: the task of theology*

Clearly there will be a continuous change in the current Southern African's socio-economic, political conditions. The rising expectations of the poor are being asserted in terms of health care, welfare provisions and such. These expectations undergird how people react to a certain degree. There is still unemployment, homelessness and many people's conditions are no better than before. Surely, the situation around the church is also changing

tremendously. This situation should definitely affect the task and purpose of doing theology. This raises important issues for the training of pastors and theological students. In this regard the following three crises are noticeable:

- *A crisis of values.* We still have values of the past and yet we are trying to create values of the future.
- *A crisis of purpose in doing theology.* We need to ask ourselves if there is a clear expression of our purpose of doing theology or if we are simply doing what has always been done. Does what we believe still have meaning?
- *A crisis of confidence in the theologians by the community of faith-practice:* This is too mysterious for comfort. In some cases theological institutions are losing the credibility they used to command.

### Conclusion

As we conclude we have raised many questions and challenges facing the task of theology today. There definitely is a need for theological institutions, researchers in theology and teachers of theology to go back to the drawing board and take stock. It can become risky to take for granted what the postulate and task should be without understanding the mandatory itself. Also the communities of faith-practice have a voice and role to play in paving a way forward. After all the current *theologising* experiences are not founded but are reactive. Maimela played his part and the onus rests upon young and upcoming theologians to pick up the baton.

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