

# Race-cognisant public theology in contemporary South Africa: tentative thoughts from a privileged location

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## Introduction

A few notes to situate my argument is in order. While I speak about race-cognisant, and with this imply becoming aware and sensitive to how race continue to function in relations, both personal and public, in the post-apartheid South Africa, I have in mind the race-cognisance of white South Africans. I attempt to work from the social location of being white – which is not intended as an apology for limitations in my approach<sup>2</sup>, but rather stated as a particular responsibility, namely, coming to terms with the political implications of this particular social location within the public sphere and what a responsible contribution towards public life which originate from this social location might be.

I approach this in dialogue with the special edition of the International Journal of Public Theology<sup>3</sup> on South African public theology and the discussions on the suggestion of Samantha Vice<sup>4</sup>, particularly as discussed in the South African Journal of Philosophy<sup>5</sup>. From this I move towards some preliminary suggestions concerning *race-cognisant public theology*<sup>6</sup>.

## Notes on race/racialisation/whiteness and its relation to public theology

A few short notes on concepts used are important<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I here follow Alcoff's (Alcoff, 1991: 25) reflection that one deformed way in which autobiographical information can be provided is where the privilege state their social location, but refrain from critically interrogating the implication of this social location.

<sup>3</sup> Volume 5 number 1, published in January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Vice's published an article in the Journal for Social Philosophy, therefore intended for an international academic audience of philosophers. Two reviews of the article by Eusebius McKaiser (McKaiser, 2011a; McKaiser, 2011b) in newspapers brought it to the attention of the broader South African public, which has resulted in a large number of responses through further articles and discussions on various websites. The Mail & Guardian developed a whole online section titled "The Whiteness Debate" in response to the article (<http://mg.co.za/specialreport/on-whiteness>).

<sup>5</sup> Volume 30 number 4, published in 2011.

<sup>6</sup> I used this phrase in the title of a dissertation, and it was suggested as the title for this paper when I was asked to contribute, thus before this paper was written. I'm not sure whether this phrase would necessarily contribute to the argument within the limited scope of this paper if read on its own, but nonetheless attempt to use it.

<sup>7</sup> I have expanded on this elsewhere (Van Wyngaard, 2012: 19-60), and in this limited space merely introduce the concepts as 'working definitions' to facilitate a clearer understanding of the rest of the argument. Since I

When drawing on the repertoire of language concerning *race* I attempt to consistently follow an approach which “*a priori* [to] dismiss race and racial categories as valid entities as deployed in scientific racism, but nevertheless [to] utilise the terms in recognition that they are socially constructed features that have historically reflected and impacted on the nature of social relations in South Africa and across the world and continue to do so” (Stevens, Franchi and Swart, 2006: xix).

With this said, one key concept which is at times used to make sense of the meanings of race is to talk about *racialisation* (Garner, 2010: 19). Racialisation implies that race has no existence except for a social existence, and the focus is therefore on the social and political processes whereby distinct racial groups are constituted (Garner, 2010: 22).

When I then speak of *whiteness*, it does not refer to the biological markers associated with the particular group of European descent which came to be known as *white* (although these biological markers continue to be important in identifying membership to this particular group), but rather to the social construction of those who are white in relation to the “other” in racial hierarchies which developed in particular ways in particular contexts - in this instance then the colonial and apartheid, as well as post-apartheid, contexts of South Africa, although constantly related to the global construction of whiteness.

Important is that in my understanding white racialised identities exist as distinct from other racial identities, since race is constructed from the perspective of those who are white and around the notion of whiteness as the ultimate humanity. Whiteness is different since it is constructed as the space from which all other identities are evaluated. White is the norm, what some describe as the unexamined norm, meaning that whiteness remain invisible and outside the realm of scrutiny (Garner, 2007: 34-38) Whiteness describe others, defining cultures, ethnicities, and race, but diverts the gaze from the self –believing that it is unexaminable, since it is the position from which the world should be evaluated.

Those who are white are privileged in various ways<sup>8</sup>, and identifying the unearned privileges associated with whiteness has been a key aspect of whiteness studies. For public theology this is of particular relevance. McKaiser points to the larger amount of social capital which whites possess in corporate South Africa compared to their black counterparts. A white candidate is considered competent until proven otherwise, while a black candidate is considered incompetent until proven otherwise (McKaiser, 2011c: 454). This also translates into the public sphere, where whites continue to have access to more social capital for public opinion formation, but also, where white voices are considered knowledgeable until evidence to the contrary appear, and black voices are considered uninformed until evidence to the contrary appear. Alcoff (Alcoff, 1991: 24) argues that in the process

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am not using “racism” in the rest of this argument and therefore I do not define it here. Suffice it to say that I largely follow Garner’s (Garner, 2010: 11) attempt at defining this fluid concept, which include understanding racism as consisting of at least a *historical power relationship, ideology and forms of discrimination*.

<sup>8</sup> In a classic argument by Peggy McIntosh (McIntosh, 1989) she started listing the various privileges associated with being white, calling these an “invisible knapsack”. This includes various transactions with the world where society reinforce the advantages of being white. Vice (Vice, 2010: 325) however make an important observation that the notion of privilege is problematic since “privilege” is often refer to goods that one does not have a right to, but many of the ways in which whites are privileges are in fact ways that all people should expect to be living, so “privilege” might be somewhat problematic. However, Vice, and myself, continue using this word which has become important in the analysis of whiteness.

of racialisation those who are white have been taught that we are more likely to have the truth, while others have been taught the opposite, and if they speak at all, it will often be haltingly and with apologies<sup>9</sup>.

It is the complexities associated with these dynamics of the public sphere which I want to discuss. What I want to attempt to move towards I'll describe as *race-cognisant public theology*. Drawing on the short definitions above, this implies becoming aware of how race continues to play into public discourse, how those of us who participate in the public sphere (and just as important, those who do not participate in the public sphere) continue to be racialised, and how the dynamics of power and privilege associated with the racialisation of society impacts on the public sphere.

Throughout this I am reflecting on Linda Alcoff's reminder that "[w]ho is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena" (Alcoff, 1991: 15). Her suggestion is that evaluating attempts at speaking on behalf of others<sup>10</sup> we have to analyze not merely the content of what is being said, nor only the location of the one saying it, but rather "where the speech goes and what it does there" (Alcoff, 1991: 26). This suggests a double focus. Apart from a reflection on what the content of responsible public theology should be, I also need to ask what responsible public theology would be given the particular political implications involved with my participation in the public sphere, and with the very fact that I have the option of participating in the public sphere. How will the particular statements I make be heard and what will the effect be when I make them.

What I attempt in this argument is therefore not a universal outline for race-cognisant public theology. Rather, my attempt is to find a way for those who are racialised as white, and we could add particularly South Africans who are racialised as white, to move towards a race-cognisant public theology<sup>11</sup>. To describe the problem of public theology within which this move should be understood, I turn to a recent dialogue between William Storrar and various South African theologians.

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<sup>9</sup> Here the complexities of South Africa need to be considered. While these patterns do repeat itself often, the South African public sphere is open towards a growing number of black public intellectuals. The importance of these public voices which open the imagination of (particularly young) black South Africans to the possibility of voicing opinions, also in the face of their white peers, cannot be exaggerated. Simply put, the demographics of South Africa do change the dynamics of these perceptions, since a growing number of examples to the contrary, of authoritative public black voices, challenge the perceptions that whites are necessarily those whose voice contain the (only) truth.

<sup>10</sup> The dialogue with Storrar discussed below reveal the task of public theology to speak "on behalf of others", and the further reflections on Vice's suggestion for whites to be silent in the public sphere also involve this. Finally I will argue that race-cognisant public theology cannot be responsible public theology if this does not involve some element of "speaking on behalf of others", if only to challenge the public sphere which is set up to amplify the voices of those who are white. I therefore find Alcoff's reflections on the problems with speaking for others of particular significance for public theology.

<sup>11</sup> I do not think that this task is exclusive to whites, but it has a particular challenge for those who are privileged within the construction of race. Furthermore, the very nature of what I am discussing make me extremely wary of ascribing to blacks what becoming aware of the dynamics of race should mean today. Lastly, I believe that Black Theology has already moved along this path for many years. Part of the privilege of being white is that one can ignore the way society is racialised, one can continue living oblivious to the dynamics of power and oppression in which your every action is embedded. This task of becoming aware of race, seem to me to be of particular importance to those who are white.

## Beyond an invitation to public discourse

Storrar describes the task of public theology as participating in creating and sustaining an inclusive public sphere. He describes ‘public sphere’, following Habermas, as “a domain of our social life in which public opinion can be formed, where any and all citizens can gather freely and without coercion to consider matters of general interest” (Storrar, 2011: 28). But Storrar attempts to go beyond Habermas by drawing on feminist readings of Habermas. He emphasize that the public sphere is what stand between people and power, and that the test of the public sphere is whether it can influence the formation of law and policy on behalf of the whole of society. Of importance is that this public sphere should be a place where the voices of the oppressed and marginalized can be heard (Storrar, 2011: 29-30). He later defines the public sphere as “a place where the silenced can find their voice and the angry lament of the victim may be heard” (Storrar, 2011: 37)<sup>12</sup>. Storrar argues that where such a public sphere does not exist, we cannot speak of public theology but should rather speak of liberation theology, which contest the exclusion of the voiceless parties from history (Storrar, 2011: 28).

While Maluleke do not deny that a public sphere as Storrar describes is important, he remains sceptical of the possibility of such a public sphere, describing it as “a massive and precarious assumption.” (Maluleke, 2011: 85). Maluleke argues that our differences is not that of culture and taste, which would have implied that the biggest challenge facing the public sphere, and therefore the task facing a public theology which contributes to the creation and sustenance of this public sphere, is to facilitate the diversity existing within this public. Rather, our challenge is that our differences is a difference of power, where “men are gods and women their dispensable temptresses ... whites are masters and blacks are servants ... some have much to eat and drink while others have nothing” (Maluleke, 2011: 86). Given this reality, he doubts whether public theology can deal with the differences. To formulate it in different words: does invitation to the public sphere, welcoming the stranger, allow for the creation of a public sphere where “citizens can gather freely and without coercion to consider matters of general interest” when these citizens are not all equally citizen, when the citizenship of those doing the welcoming is seldom if ever questioned, while the citizenship of the strangers, is constantly called into question by the very continued structuring of our social life and material realities.

Cochrane’s critique follows a similar line of thought. He affirms the importance of participating in creating and sustaining an inclusive public sphere, and affirms the responsibility of speaking on behalf of the silenced, but is critical of Storrar’s notion that protest theologies are not fully public theologies. Again we find the argument that even the most inclusive public spheres continue to contain a tension between ‘civil’ discourse and ‘prophetic’ discourse. For Cochrane public theology should exist exactly as defined by this tension, not as one side of the tension (Cochrane, 2011: 47-48). Cochrane gets to the heart of the problem when arguing that if public theology is defined as this inclusive dialogue where the silenced are heard then we do not actually find many such examples. Rather, participation in the public sphere, “where citizens gather freely and without coercion” remains the privilege of a few, indeed of certain classes of people (Cochrane, 2011: 55-56).

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<sup>12</sup> Cochrane’s (Cochrane, 2011: 47) summary of Storrar captures the essence of vision of public theology: “the question of what makes for a responsible public theology is already answered, and it presents us with two specific challenges: to expand the sphere of the public (so that more people are able to participate in it), and to defend it (so that those who do participate are not subsequently excluded from participation or unfairly constrained in their ability to participate).

While the notion of an inclusive public sphere need not be rejected (indeed, for those in public theology, sensitive to the fact that many are silenced, such an inclusive public sphere would remain an ideal), the belief that the modern democracy would be able to facilitate such a public discourse in the foreseeable future seem to be naïve. But while Maluleke and Cochrane argues, convincingly in my view, that the angry voices of the oppressed should continue to be considered legitimate public participants, my focus fall to the other side: if indeed Cochrane and Maluleke is correct in their assessment, what does responsible public theology look like for those who are given access to this global public discourse, those whose social location present them with the privilege of participating in the space between people and power, to bring to political fruition the needs citizens (and non-citizens)?

What about those of us who do belong to the certain “class” of people who can participate in the public sphere? Those who are the male gods, the white masters or who have an abundance to eat and drink? In short, if this public sphere where the stranger can gather as citizen, where the voiceless can be heard, remain elusive, in spite of our democracies, bills of human rights and constitutions, what does responsible public theology mean for those who are privileged voices in the public sphere? With these broad questions in mind I turn to a particular attempt at grappling with racial privilege in the post-apartheid public sphere.

## On white silence and beyond

The earlier notes on whiteness introduced some of the difficult questions which I believe need to be asked concerning white public theology in South Africa. In order to explore this I will draw on an article of Samantha Vice which gave rise to what I believe was an important public debate on whiteness in the post-apartheid South Africa, and particularly the role of white South Africans in a post-apartheid South Africa. Although Vice and Storrar participate in different dialogues, with different interlocutors, and a simple comparison between the two is impossible, a certain tension exists between these two approaches which allow for creative reimagining of the issues at hand. Contrary to Storrar’s description of what the task of public theology should be<sup>13</sup>, Vice has argued for a certain kind of silence<sup>14</sup> as the appropriate stance for whites in the public sphere<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> The unstated assumption in Storrar is that this task is to be taken up by those with a voice in the public sphere, only those who already carry the power to participate and influence the public sphere can contribute to Storrar’s understanding of creating and sustaining the public sphere. If my argument on white social capital in the public sphere above is correct, then this imply that for Storrar white voices in South Africa has a responsibility to participate in creating and sustaining an inclusive public sphere.

<sup>14</sup> Her article revolve around two claims: first, that shame, more than guilt and regret, is the appropriate emotion for white South Africans whose moral identity is tainted by both our past as well as our continued privileging due to being white in this particular racialised society, and the way in which this is tied in to the oppression of others. Secondly, she argues that given this, silence is the appropriate response for white South Africans. The focus of my argument is on this second claim, which has direct implications for our discussion on public theology, although I will return to the first later

<sup>15</sup> In her response to the 2011 edition of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* under discussion, she attempt to define her understanding of these spheres in more detail (Vice, 2011: 508-513). Her definition of ‘private’ is quite clear (apart from inner-directed work she understand this to also include close relations with family and friends), but her distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘political’ space is not yet clearly defined. Furthermore the notion that silence is only appropriate for the latter still leave one with some confusion as to when exactly she consider silence to be appropriate, particularly since she states that the silence she advocates for does not imply that whites should not stand for public office or join governmental organizations. I do not want to ignore Vice’s attempt to give a more nuanced formulation of what she implies with silence in the public sphere, nor

I start by exploring her broad suggestion, how this was read by others, and the important critique which this brings to white public theologians seeking to find a responsible public theology for the post-apartheid South Africa.

The phrase which caught the attention of many respondents, and which I believe open an important critique on white public theology, was her suggestion to white South Africans that if one recognizes the moral damage that whiteness has done to the self, “[o]ne would live as quietly and decently as possible, refraining from airing one’s view on the political situation in the public realm, realizing that it is not one’s place to offer diagnoses and analyses, that blacks must be left to remake the country in their own way.” (Vice, 2010: 335)

Vice’s silence is not a total withdrawal from society. She advises that white South Africans actively listen to black voices and read the literature of the oppressed. Furthermore, if silence in the public sphere also becomes silence in the private sphere, in the sense that it becomes a refusal to acknowledge the effects of whiteness and to think about the situation, then this is a moral failure, not a virtuous action (Vice, 2010: 336).

Lastly, Vice’s silence should be described as an attempt to allow the excluded other to find her own voice. She quotes Paul Taylor saying “Silence, on this reading, is the complement to *the other’s voice*; it signals one’s willingness to receive the other’s struggle to find words both for his or her experiences and for the self that those experiences have conspired with the act of expression to create.” (Vice, 2010: 336). To relate this to the previous discussion, while Storrar’s welcoming of the stranger is constantly described as an active process of inviting the voiceless, Vice’s call for humility suggest that the primary responsibility of white South Africans is working on our own whiteness, opening up the space for black voices to continue with the task of public opinion formation and of bringing this opinion to political fruition, and through our silence communicate an openness to listen to the oppressed, an openness to having those excluded from the public sphere become voices in the formation of public opinion, including my own opinion.

There is a prerequisite for being able to identify with her suggestion. She writes not for whites in general, but for a specific sub-group of white South Africans, those who “see themselves as a problem” (Vice, 2010: 326). This involves recognizing that by virtue of being born white, I am inescapably morally damaged as part of the oppressor, privileged by virtue of being white, and formed by habits associated with this privilege<sup>16</sup> (Vice, 2010: 326). Silence is appropriate when we recognize that the problem is with who we are (although who we are can be described as a question of ‘systemic moral luck’), not merely with particular problematic actions (Vice, 2010: 331). Her suggested silence cannot be comprehended if the continuing social construction of whiteness, and the way in which this continue patterns of privilege, is not recognized.

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make her approach normative, as if uncovering some original meaning of her words would in itself provide an authoritative argument for white participation in the public sphere, but rather for the moment just read Vice’s public the broad space of opinion formation and political influence, which seem to be the way in which many of her respondents, both popular and academic, read her use of the notion ‘public’.

<sup>16</sup> Responding from within South Africa to Alcoff’s question “what is it to acknowledge one’s whiteness? Is it to acknowledge that one is inherently tied to structures of domination and oppression, that one is irrevocably on the wrong side?” she writes that the answer “is fairly obviously ‘yes’” (Vice, 2010: 326).

That said, recognizing the continued privileges associated with being white, the possibility that I am continuously acting out habits associated with this privilege, and that I am morally damaged as part of the group of the oppressors need not necessarily lead to silence.

McKaiser (McKaiser, 2011c: 460) for example point out that the emphasis on silence might be an expression of lingering whiteness<sup>17</sup> when it assumes that the black interlocutor cannot effectively rebut whiteness. On a more personal note he points out that as a black person he has certain angst in the face of whiteness, and that he needs white participants in the public sphere with whom he can learn to overcome this angst.

A common reflection is that there are times of grave injustice when speaking out against a bigger moral threat should be risked regardless of the moral danger of speaking from a privileged position. When exactly this would be the case is obviously open to interpretation<sup>18</sup>. While silence might not always be the most appropriate response, there are possibilities in such a suggestion which is important to consider.

### Privileged whiteness and Public Theology: listening and self-critique

Maluleke and Cochrane helped us to recognize that the constructive and public role of protest theologies or liberation theologies need to be taken seriously, also amidst a democratic dispensation. My concern is however not with those who are voiceless, excluded from the public sphere, but with those privileged, among other reasons with excessive social capital contributing to influence over public discourse, and privileged by social constructs which create the assumption that their voice is authoritative, not because of the content of what is being said, but merely because of the social location of the one speaking. So how can those who are privileged within a racialised society approach public theology? Let me start with Vice's suggested listening, before moving towards a first instance of 'speaking' responsibly in public which intentionally reflect on privileged social locations. These two do not exhaust the possibilities for white participation in public, but I find these two crucial for any further possibilities<sup>19</sup>.

Stating so simplistically that we should 'listen' is somewhat problematic, since it might fall into the category of quotable advice with little in content<sup>20</sup>, so I want to expand on it by focusing particularly on questions of why those privileged listen. I have mentioned above that part of the racialisation of society is that whites were assumed to be knowledgeable until proven otherwise, while the opposite was true for black voices. Becoming conscience of my own whiteness then imply in an important

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<sup>17</sup> McKaiser use the word 'whiteness' which was used in Vice's original article, and which she borrow from Paul Taylor (Vice, 2010: 324). I stick to whiteness primarily because I find the term to encompass what is described as 'whiteness', and since I'm not sure that creating more variations on the word 'white' is going to help us in communicating the underlying problems.

<sup>18</sup> Vice later discussed some of the other possible critiques to silence which need not be rehearsed now (Vice, 2011: 509-511). One which is of particular interest is that of Derek Hook (Hook, 2011: 498-499) who ask: who are whites anyway to argue that the appropriate response in the face of black interlocutors is silence? Can't we leave this for blacks to decide? I can imagine some of my black interlocutors insisting that I speak, that I engage them in dialogue, asking question, insisting that they are worthy dialogue partners.

<sup>19</sup> I have argued for a range of possible responses elsewhere, particularly focusing on dialogue and social analysis (Van Wyngaard, 2012). The limitations in space force me to focus on less, but furthermore I want to argue for suggestions which to some extent preceed those which I've previously described

<sup>20</sup> Remember the youth groups that taught us that we have two ears and one mouth, and should therefore as Christians spend more time listening than speaking.

way that this impulse to speak, also to speak where others are concerned, assuming that I have the truth, be questioned (Alcoff, 1991: 24). While Storrar emphasise listening, it seem to be a listening in order to make known. Public theology listens so that the voiceless can be drawn into the public discourse. But the listening that I want to argue for might be motivated on different grounds.

Bruce Janz has pushed beyond Vice's understanding of shame, which lead her to argue for silence, as the appropriate emotion given the reality of whiteness, and argues for shame as existential to the reality of the particular whiteness of South Africa. His approach is on the one hand helpful, in the sense that he provide a way of speaking about the shame associated with whiteness which is not dependant on a felt emotion<sup>21</sup> but rather existential. Existential shame is not necessarily felt, but it sometimes manifests in the opposite (through hyper-nationalisms, hyper-individualisms and self-justifying stances), which I find a helpful analysis in explaining certain white responses in South Africa today. Shame then, when recognised, is recognition of my own disorder. "That disorder comes in part from the recognition that the white South African self cannot truly own its place in the social order, since that place has come at the cost of others, if only indirectly" (Janz, 2011: 466).

Seen in this way, silence in the public sphere is not merely because of the fact that the public sphere is weighted in my favour, and I should therefore commit not to entrench white privilege by continuing to assume that I may dominate the public sphere, nor is silence merely an invite for others to speak, although that is important. But rather, silence might be due to a growing recognition of the disorder of my own being, and the disconnection from the society of which I am part.

Janz suggests that such a view of shame allow for an important exploration of Vice's suggestion for listening. Listening is described as a form of witnessing. Witnessing 'bare life'. "It is the bare life that existed as a result of white action during apartheid, and also the bare life that became apparent within whites by virtue of the actions of other whites." (Janz, 2011: 468). This listening involves refraining from thinking that we know how "they" are as well as refraining from listening just in order to hear what "they" want so that we can satisfy those that were wronged (Janz, 2011: 469).

For public theology, this would imply listening to the voiceless, particular to the voiceless inherently tied to our own privileged position, for the sake of witnessing how our whiteness exists because others have been made black, witnessing the truth of what apartheid has done. For gaining a sense of understanding concerning our own disorder and how this is tied to the disorder in society, recognizing that anything that precede this listening can never be called responsible public theology, but also facing the limits of our ability: we are not guaranteed that our racialised identities will be fixed. While changes in the material reality in South Africa are needed, this does not banish the basis for shame (Janz, 2011: 467), it does not in itself reorder our own existence.

This is the limits which we need to find ourselves against. We listen to the voice of the voiceless regardless of whether we might be able to bring the needs of those excluded from the public sphere to political fruition, recognizing that it might not be ours to fix, that some things in post-apartheid South Africa will have to be left to black South Africans to engage on their own terms. We listen

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<sup>21</sup> The reality is that recognition of shame is not necessarily visibly among white South Africans. Sometimes the opposite is true. Vice's silence was as a response to the appropriate emotion, shame, which has led some of her critics to fear that silence them become a way of ridding ourselves of shame, thus whites being silent for their own self (Hook, 2011).

while facing the fact that due to my own whiteness, there are limits to what I can do as a public theologian.

Let me finally move to a more constructive suggestion (although some might not consider this constructive at all), one which I don't think was clearly formulated by Vice or her respondents, yet which might underlie many of the attempts by her white respondents, and herself as well, to speak in public. When white voices enter the public sphere it is as privileged participants, as I've pointed out above. As privileged participants I want to argue that one primary responsibility which whites need to take upon themselves is to engage their own privileged position in public<sup>22</sup>.

If whites are to be implicated with the problematic aspects of their group, regardless of the acts in which they have engaged as individuals<sup>23</sup>, then all the more when entering the public sphere. In the political dimensions of public discourse, whites cannot escape being identified with those who are white, although they can indeed be at odds with whiteness. Herein the possibility for responsible public participation might emerge. While being identified with this particular privileged group, the insistence on stating in public that which this group prefer silence upon become an important public act.

The position which might be required has been described by some as that of the race traitor<sup>24</sup>. In a context where silence is expected on issues of race and its continued effect in society, "[t]raitorousness requires me to insist on my whiteness - to insist that I and others recognize my whiteness as always relevant, always a factor in the way that I conceive the world and others; and to detect that factor in the places where it is presently most undetectable to me" (Sullivan, 2006: 159). The traitorous position does not make me less white in the sense that the various systemic privileges provided with being white<sup>25</sup> can somehow be denied. It does however mean that the normalised constructs are being destabilised when the common assumptions held by those who are white are being questioned by some who are supposed to be insiders (Bailey, 1998: 32-33).

If taken up by white public theologians, then this implies contributing towards destabilizing the centre. I believe this could start with a commitment to analyze the undeserved privileges associated

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<sup>22</sup> I am not suggesting that it is impossible for whites to speak beyond what relates to their own privileged position. I do think that a responsible critical participation in public is possible for whites, but this I believe is dependent on engaging their own privilege, otherwise it loses much of its moral integrity.

<sup>23</sup> This remains an issue of debate: whether individual whites can move beyond whiteness through personal actions. I would argue however that the visible connections to white identity make this move almost impossible. Although individual relationships can develop so that individual black interlocutors can choose not to regard particular white speakers as 'typically white', this rely upon in-depth knowledge of a particular individual, knowledge which in most instances will not exist, so that in public participation, drawing on particular actions which I have undertaken cannot change the political implications of speaking from a white social location.

<sup>24</sup> Alcoff (Alcoff, 1998: 14-21) points out how some drawing on the language of becoming race traitors has suggested that this implies that white people can somehow reject their own whiteness, assuming that the privileges associated with being white no longer exist. This might make us wary of using this concept, although Sullivan and Bailey's arguments provide important possibilities. I keep with this concept for the moment, although I believe a more appropriate notion, which carry the same commitment to contribute to the dismantling of this particular identity from the insiders' position – recognizing that the extent to which this is possible remain limited.

<sup>25</sup> Such as continuing to benefit from the intergenerational economic and educational advantages presented to those who are white, as well as the privileged position we find ourselves in public discourse

with whiteness, and insisting that this may not be silenced in public discourse<sup>26</sup>. While listening suggests that our primary interlocutor is the black other, this insistence on whiteness make our primary audience the white public, calling this particular group, as part of this group, into an active struggle with the systems of privilege and oppression, but more particularly with the shame and disorder which is associated with this identity – which cannot be disentangled from the disorder associated with those made ‘lesser humans’ through processes of racialisation and the disorder of society.

## Conclusion

My conclusion is tentative. Listening might not be a personal quality that comes naturally. Being drawn to public theology was due to a personal inclination to speak, to contribute to public conversations on justice, but in some sense this inclination, exactly because of the political implications associated with it in this particular context when I myself, due to my embeddedness within a particular group identified as white, need to be resisted... at least long enough to analyze my instinct to speak.

Secondly, I cannot guarantee that public insistence on whiteness would necessarily lead to a more inclusive public sphere<sup>27</sup>; on the contrary, it might even create a more divisive reality in the immediate future. Obviously among white participants, since this opens a dialogue which silencing might have contributed to ‘keeping the peace’. But my expectation is that this might also force cracks among participants within the public sphere from different racial social locations where we proceeded with the agreement that “we’ll just refrain from speaking about such things”, an agreement that we’ll rather focus on what we agree upon, than that which is guaranteed to bring about difficulty. But without such a public recognition of undeserved privilege by the privileged, it would seem inevitable that our conflicts will continue to give rise to violence in some form<sup>28</sup> as the only possible future for society.

The above need not exhaust possibilities for white public theologies, but where these two are absent, it would seem to me that the participation of white theologians and churches in public runs a greater risk of reinforcing and working from problematic racialised group identities.

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<sup>26</sup> One of the primary ways in which whiteness is described is as a certain kind of invisibility. While some have challenged whether this is appropriate in South Africa, since race was historically made a conscious marker which determined a highly visible hierarchy (Steyn, 2005: 122), my particular suggestion for insisting on whiteness is dependent on a context which in the post-apartheid South Africa is actively denying that race determine continued privilege (and in the process making race invisible), reinventing notions that privilege is purely due to “hard work” or “individual commitment”, rather than systemic advantages.

<sup>27</sup> In this particular instance I go back to the way Storrar described the public sphere.

<sup>28</sup> This might be the violence of language of exclusion, economic exclusion, but does not exclude acts of subjective violence. I take this distinctions from Žižek (Žižek, 2008: 10).s

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