

Simon Maimela and the prophetic vision of liberation for Black Theology

Francisca Chimhanda

Department of Philosophy and Systematic Theology
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

This article celebrates Simon Maimela's contribution to Black Liberation Theology in South Africa. It explores and highlights Maimela's prophetic vision of liberation, which is crucial to the survival of Black Theology. It focuses on Maimela's prophetic stance in recognising the Christian God as being actively involved in the dynamic historical existential liberation of the oppressed; reviving the prophetic mission of the Church; advocating hermeneutics that show the historical truth of biblical faith as relative and dynamic; and envisioning Black Theology of the signs of the times that is creative, accountable and responsible and that consequently takes the liberation task beyond liberation from apartheid in South Africa and colonial oppression in Africa.

Introduction

Simon Maimela was one of the first Black theologians in the 1970s in apartheid South Africa (Frostin 1988:92). He is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa (Hopkins 1989:109). Although Black Theology in South Africa has been dormant for more than a decade, today there is keen interest to revive it. Therefore, in considering the place of Black Theology in post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Africa, the prophetic stance of Simon Maimela is axiomatic. Maimela's passion for a prophetic approach to Black Theology of liberation resounds in his book *Proclaim freedom to my people* (1987). His prophetic focus is on the recognition of Christian hope that portrays the creative liberating and redeeming action of God from both personal and social sins; revitalising the prophetic mission of the Church; promoting a creative, concrete, historical and liberative praxis in the light of faith; a theology that is responsible and relevant to the signs of the time; and working for harmonious and peaceful relations of all people.

Prophetic vision

To be a prophet is to speak the truth in time and space. In the Christian tradition, to engage in prophetic witness is to be a martyr – to be able to speak and stand for the truth in the face of life-threatening opposition. According to Tamez (2001:57), a prophetic dream stems from a response to a state of affairs with which we are deeply dissatisfied and which we want to change. A prophetic vision, in turn, encapsulates the life that we desire and not the life that we live. As one of the protagonists of Black Theology, Maimela was disenchanted with White supremacy that robbed the Black masses of their humanity and freedom in apartheid South Africa and he is equally disenchanted with the continuing marginalisation of the millions of Black people (in particular) and minority groups in a democratic South Africa. He therefore dreams of the affirmation of Black humanity and dignity (in particular) and all people (in general) through the transformation of socio-economic and political structures so that justice and freedom can become the common property of all people (Maimela 1987:ii). Furthermore, Maimela foresees the critical engagement of all stakeholders (the people themselves, oppressors, the church and Christians as a whole, and socio-economic and political systems) in the creative transformative process for freedom.

The liberating-redeemer God

Maimela's advocacy of prophetic witness is anchored in his vision of the Christian God as Creator, Liberator and Redeemer who engages with human history and initiates and leads humanity to liberation and humane and peaceful co-existence. In Black Theology of liberation from apartheid and colonialism, the oppressed Black masses were both locutors (engaged in providing answers for their situation of oppression in relation to liberation and salvation) and interlocutors (asked questions about their situation and divine and human agency in the attainment of freedom and human dignity). In this

orientation, Maimela (1989:155) is conversant with Liberation Theology as a whole and Black Theology in the USA in particular (cf. Maimela 1989). Pressing questions about the lot of the oppressed Black masses included: Does God exist? Where is God in all this? What does God say and what is God willing to do? (Maimela & Hopkins 1989:155; Maimela 1987:69; Gutiérrez 1987:xiv & xv). Consequently, Maimela identified God/Christ as Creator–Liberator–Redeemer (Maimela 1981; 1987:54–58, 65 & 81); Yahweh who has a predilection for the *anawim* (poor of Yahweh) (Gutiérrez 1987:xiii); God of the oppressed who in the plight of Black people who were suffering from White supremacy could properly be called the Black God and Black Christ (Cone 1975:133-137). Understood this way, the Christian God, Creator and Redeemer is a living dynamic presence who engages actively in human history and liberation. Liberation theologians in general put a high stake on these models.

Maimela (1981:47; 1987:2 & 3) located prophetic advocacy for the poor and marginalised (in our case the masses of Black people as rooted in God/Christ and the Old Testament prophetic tradition). He claimed that Black Christians could get inspiration of God's option for their liberation from biblical models, for example, the liberation of Israel from Egypt (cf. Exodus) and Christ's prophetic mission (Lk 4:18–21). Maimela (1987:2) showed that God, as Creator and Redeemer of humankind, is not indifferent to the human condition of alienation from God–humanity–the world. Instead, God rebukes the oppressors through his/her prophets or ministers. Accordingly, biblical faith affirms God to be actively engaged in human history as Creator and Redeemer who is gratuitously loving and merciful.

In the Exodus paradigm of liberation, the Old Testament *anawim* (the poor of Yahweh) motif and Christ's mission agenda (Lk 4:18ff.), God is portrayed as being uncompromisingly on the side of the oppressed. The *anawim* motif shows God urging the Israelites to be sensitive to the poor or disadvantaged of society. The poor of Yahweh here are a trilogy of widow, stranger and orphan (cf. Ex 22:21-24; 23:9; Lev 19:33 & 34; Deut 27:19; 24:17).

From the etymology of *anawim*, it is understood that God “stoops down” to the oppressed and marginalised. According to Las Casas, “God has the freshest and keenest memory for the least and most forgotten” (cf. Gutiérrez 1987:xxvii; 1992:194). However, the Christian God is universal and works for an inclusive liberation and redemption. With this in mind and seeing the mutual influence of liberation and reconciliation, liberation theologians of balance (including Maimela) are aware that “God cares for the oppressed but God also has salvific concern for the oppressors” (Roberts 1987:18).

According to Maimela (1987:27 & 28), God calls humanity to participate as co-creators in historical, concrete, liberative and transformative action – hence the challenge to the Church and Christians for prophetic witness. Assmann (1975:35) concurs with this view by saying that liberation theologians understand “the transcendence of God” as follows:

He stands before us on the frontier of the historical future. God is pro-vocative – he calls us forwards, and is only to be found as one who goes forward with his people in a constant process of uprooting. Hence the prophets' constant interpretation of God's calls on us in terms of historical and political event.

Assmann (1975:35) adds:

Jesus and the prophets opposed the cultism and legalism of orthodoxy and with the orthopraxis of truth made history by means of effective action in the world. Hence the basic characteristic of faith is its historical practice.

Point of departure for a Black Theology of liberation

Maimela (1981:47; 1987:101–120) is in line with other liberation theologians (Gutiérrez 1988:xxxiv, Assmann 1975:69) in locating the starting point of liberation theology (Black Theology) in critical reflecting on concrete historical experiences of alienation and marginalisation of Black people in the light of liberative Christian praxis. His theological method is strongly incarnational in that he proposes a creative prophetic and relevant Christian liberating praxis that historicises the incarnation. He sees Christian historical praxis as the embodiment of “germinal events” of Christianity (the Christ-event of the incarnation, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension).

In historical liberative praxis, Maimela urges for a creative incarnational embodiment of God/Christ in the world. He says that in the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth, God breaks into human history to straighten things out; to bring freedom and liberation to the oppressed. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has the final word and takes sides in liberating the oppressed (1987:18). Maimela sees

human beings as co-creators and participants in the creative and concrete liberation of the oppressed. This comes from an awareness of a dynamic God who actively involves humans in the present order to transform the natural social environment; that scripture that is understood primarily as Gospel and authorises freedom of action means that there is no limit to new and unique ways of becoming neighbours to one another. It gives criteria for love and justice that enables multiracial and multicultural living (1987:16 & 17).

Prophetic witness is therefore rooted in God and in the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. To this effect, Maimela (1981:47) maintains:

The starting-point of liberation theologians is not the Bible or some once-and-for-all given, existent in kerygmatic “truths” which can be distilled and reproduced so as to be applied at the right moment. Rather, the starting-point in liberation theology is the concrete, historical praxis which claims to be Christian, that is, the real life itself in which the “germinal events” of Christianity are believed to be incarnated (embodied).

Assmann (1975:69) accentuates this view by identifying Christ as the animator of history. He explains that this affirmation of the presence of Christ in the historical process should result in the uncompromising commitment of every individual to the struggle for liberation and sees the connection of Christ the liberator and liberating Christian praxis as follows:

This Christ has to be always challenging, a prophet and a liberator, one who judges, condemns, and provokes, calls us forward, introducing a dialectic into the process. (Assman 1975:69)

Gutiérrez (1988:9) calls attention to the Christian community’s clear and critical reflection on the situation of the marginalised and the oppressors (i.e. the dynamics of impoverishing economic and socio-cultural issues) by using, for example, Marxist social analysis (1988:8) as the “first step” in the theology of liberation.

In theology as a “first act” (Gutiérrez 1987:xiii), then, Liberation Theology is understood to be interdisciplinary. Maimela (1987:93–95) affirms that Liberation Theology borrows critical tools from the social sciences (sociology, psychology, politics, economics, etc.). Critical reflection on the socio-economic situation enables Christians to understand sin in an “all-embracing sense” (inclusive of individual and communal or structural dimensions).

In theology as a “second act”, the Christian community aligns its concrete social life with biblical faith. Maimela (1981:46) explains that theology, then, is “an effort to articulate the action of faith, the shape of praxis conceived and realised in obedience”. He maintains that theology or hermeneutics that is done in this way is truth revealing in that we are able to “see the broader horizons of the desired transformation” and “offer a dynamic and comprehensive notion of salvation” (Maimela 1987:95).

In this stance, liberation theologians deviate from and offer a corrective to traditional or orthodox hermeneutics that subscribe to the Bible as giving us eternal, static and sterile truth (Maimela 1981:44–46; 1987:78; Gutiérrez 1988:10). In the theory-praxis dialectic, orthodox interpretation portrayed biblical truth as independent of human action. Maimela (1981:46) maintains that traditional hermeneutics caused an “epistemological split” between theory and praxis. In contrast, liberation theologians offer historical truths that are partial, relative and answerable to the signs of the time. In Liberation Theology, the truth of faith are constantly evolving in that the biblical message speaks anew to each new concrete situation in order to heal human brokenness as it is incarnated and realised in human struggles to be free and to be more human (Maimela 1981:46).

In understanding truths of faith as historically construed, Maimela (1981:46) says that theologians of liberation offer a “Copernican” hermeneutics that is committed to transforming the world. He claims that the traditional “theory–praxis dialectic” is reversed to the “movement from practice to theory, that is, from action that aims at transforming the world to a theory or strategy that spells out how best to achieve the desired transformation” (Maimela 1981:47). He goes on to point out that in this context theory has undergone a different meaning. Rather than complying with the “platonic, static and non-historical truth” of orthodox hermeneutics, theory is now “a historical relative strategy or means by which truth can work itself effectively in the world, thereby transforming the world, and overcoming untruth (sin or oppression) in socio-political relations”.

According to Maimela (1987:96), theology as a second act is incarnational:

Liberation theology sees the incarnation as the historical event in which God experienced the depth of human suffering and degradation thus committing the divine self to the giving of abundant life to the sinful, oppressed and poor people.

He (1981:47) explains:

The concrete life of Christian obedience life (is) shaped by impulses of the proclamation of the gospel which theology must delve deeply into, analyse, reflect upon and criticise so that it might be projected into a deeper, more effective and adequate embodiment of the Christian ethos.

In this praxis–theory dialectic, Maimela (1981:47) poses questions that are pertinent to the agenda of theological reflection or theology as a “second act”:

Does a given Christian praxis measure up to the demands or vision of the gospel? Has the gospel been misused to support untruths and oppression? How can the biblical message be liberated so as to effect the transformation of the world and the healing of human brokenness? How best can the biblical vision be incarnated and realised in human struggles to be free and to be more human?

Gutiérrez (1988:9) emphasises this point when he says that the “second act” in theological reflection happens “at sundown”. As theologians reflect on a transformative liberational Christian praxis, they should be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the Christian community.

He adds:

To reflect upon the presence and action of the Christian in the world means, moreover, to go beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. It implies openness to the world, gathering the questions it poses, being attentive to its historical transformation. This is of prime importance.

An important development in this new pastoral-theological epistemology is that liberation theology deals with real questions in the modern world and commits itself to responding to them appropriately.

Historical truths of faith as partial, relative and dynamic

Maimela is convinced that human beings have no direct access to ultimate truths (1981:46; 1987:81). Truths of faith are historically construed. In his understanding of hermeneutics as truth-revealing transformative praxis, Maimela (1981:40–50) concurs with Gadamer in noting the historicity of interpretation. Gadamer (1975:373 & 374) sees the historicity of the text and that of the interpreter as two horizons and claims that meaning is reached at the fusion of these horizons. Rahner (1996:31 & 32) adds an important dimension to the dynamism of interpretation in postulating that transcendent human beings are open to an “infinite horizon of questioning” (experience of) God.

Maimela (1981:48 & 49) explains that hermeneutics is nothing but truth-revealing praxis. What hermeneutics have to unpack is the social life itself in which Christian agents are acting out what they believe. The truths of faith that inspire Christian prophetic and transformative commitment are relative in that they address and respond to a particular historical situation. Maimela notes that truth has to be experienced and recognised as the truth that is transformative in order to liberate people from untruthful (sinful and oppressive) social conditions. His insights are compatible with the biblical injunction that to know love/God is to do justice (cf. Jer 22; Jn 8:44–47; 1 Jn 3:17 & 18; 4:20–21; Mt 7:16–18) in that he proposes the mutual influencing of (theory and praxis) “knowing the truth and doing the truth” (Maimela 1981:48).

Perspectivism, such as shown by Black Theology’s focus on the liberation of Black people from apartheid and colonialism, makes the truth of faith partial in speaking to a specific situation in time. New situations will bring new problems that require new solutions. They demand new ways of seeing, perceiving and acting. From this insight on the relativity of historical truths, Maimela is able to see a place for Black Theology after liberation from apartheid and in the new multicultural and democratic South Africa. Maimela claims that Black Theology of liberation’s task is to provide a critical vision and guidance for good governance so that rulers (or the formerly oppressed) “are prevented from becoming oppressors themselves and therefore promoters of injustice and unfreedom and to remind

Christians that God is by definition the God of liberation and liberty who is offended by human domination and enslaving of their fellows” (Maimela 1987:iii).

An inclusive vision of historical dynamic liberation

Maimela can be recognised as a theologian of balance (Fowler 1981:82 & 83; Erickson 1991:166 & 167) in his critical appraisal of the Black and White historical situation of alienation and subjugation. Fowler explains that theologians of balance portray conjunctive faith. They engage in a dialectic discourse in which polar opposites are considered in a “both/and” perspective. Erickson, in concurring with this view, says that theologians with conjunctive faith affirm both particularity and universality and therefore speak from the standpoints of both subjectivity and objectivity. He adds:

To such theologians, the line between oppressor and oppressed does not pass between but through peoples and groups. Black and white are not mutually exclusive experiences in which the former possesses all the truth; and the latter none of it; but rather they are complementary experiences both of which are necessary for the full attainment of truth” (Erickson 1991:167).

From the holistic anthropology that emanates from his critical analysis of the God–humanity–cosmos mutual interdependence, Maimela was able to identify the entanglement in the impasse to affirm the true humanity and dignity of the masses of Black people and consequently authenticate freedom for all people in apartheid South Africa and colonial Africa. In his historical, critical and transformative hermeneutic, Maimela is able to draw out the contribution of all stakeholders to harmonious multiracial and multicultural living. In dreaming of a new South Africa in which people of all races would live in harmony and freedom, Maimela acknowledged that “no one is free until all are free”. In saying this, he concurred with Roberts (1994:52) in recognising that “humanity is wrapped up in a single garment of destiny and for this pragmatic reason; reconciliation between equals as well as liberation must ever be a goal”. Roberts goes on to explain that in reciprocal relationality, “it becomes true that when whites recognise the dignity of blacks, they will be surprised to realise that they *have* found their own humanity”.

Maimela is inclusive in understanding that human relationships are complex – reciprocal and paradoxical. Recognising the limitation of the human condition in its propensity to sin, Maimela adopts a critical instrument for keeping checks and balances. Consequently, his analysis of the human condition is incisive analysis in that he holds all human beings accountable for individual sin as well as for structural or systemic sin. Roberts (1994:80) concurs with this when he says:

Black Theology must speak externally to liberation from white oppression ... must speak internally to the need for forgiveness from sin and exploitation within our own group ... must speak of liberation within from blacks and liberation from without from whites. But at the same time, it must speak of reconciliation that brings together blacks, of liberation that brings blacks and whites together.

Maimela (1987:ii & iii) – in his vision of a new South Africa in which “no one is free until all are free” – sees reconciliation as a theological imperative for both the oppressed and the oppressors, especially in view of the dual nature of sin that tarnishes the dignity of both the oppressor and the oppressed. He urges that the oppressed groups become partners with God in building a more humane society. He points to the reciprocal nature of reconciliation when he urges both Black and White Christians to work for justice for everyone before, during and after liberation from racial bondage and to be on guard that leadership in the new liberated South Africa do not become oppressors themselves.

From this perspective, Maimela recognised that the oppressed Black masses had a critical part to play in their own liberation. He was emphatic that it was hope in the Redeemer and liberating God that challenged Black Christians to come out of the cocoons of “defeatism and apathy” when they were inspired “to be on the cutting edge of social transformation as embodiment of Christ’s love in human relationships” (Maimela 1987:iv).

In Black–White dialectical relationships and historical praxis, there is what is understood as the “sociology of knowledge” (Bonino 1979:262). Bonino explains that in dynamic critical hermeneutics in theological epistemology, various relations exist between theological thinking and the life of the community that does the thinking. It can be said that in multicultural living such as what was experienced in apartheid South Africa, and in terms of human distorted relationships, the “sociology of knowledge” in theological epistemology accounts for the blindness on the part of one group in not

seeing how their behaviour alienates and deprives other groups of their God-given dignity. Recognition of what Roberts calls a “split level trap” concerning the impasse in Black and White relationships enables Black theologians to see that the “recovery of the humanity of blacks does not seek to make whites second class citizens” (Roberts 1994:52) or, in other words, not to produce a situation of reversed racism. In this context, Maimela concurs with Roberts (1987:18) in exposing the paradox of the human condition: that sin tarnishes both the oppressed and the oppressor and that in a twist of irony “sometimes the oppressed are also oppressors”. Furthermore, sometimes it is observed that the oppressed of erstwhile become the oppressors of today. Roberts (1987:18) concludes that Black theologians should recognise that “God cares for the oppressed but God also has salvific concern for the oppressors”.

It can be said that Maimela’s balanced way in theological epistemology offers a corrective for radical elements in Black Theology. This applies to Maimela’s understanding of sin, which takes into account both individual and systemic sin as undermining human dignity and freedom. For Maimela, authentic liberation has to include all people irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, creed, gender and age. For Maimela, too, an all-embracing salvation takes note of “realised” and “futuristic” aspects of salvation – salvation as a lived reality in the here and now and salvation in the afterlife.

Maimela meticulously uses inclusive language and we can deduce from this that he understands God to be “neither male, nor female” (Gal 3:8). We can conclude that he sees women, in particular Black women, as the “oppressed of the oppressed” in a patriarchal Church and society.

Prophetic mission for the Church

Historical liberative praxis places theology in the centre of the life and worship of the Church, the believing community (Maimela 1987:1; Roberts 1987:18). In this context Maimela (1987:3–21) challenges the Church to shift from a “vague and charitable concern with social issues” (social aid) and take up the challenge of its prophetic mission, which places it in the centre of socio-economic and political transformation (Bonino 1979:261). Maimela, then, concurs with other liberation theologians in claiming that the Church and theology have to be political but not partisan (Roberts 1987:18). The Church therefore has to overcome the negative critique that is reinforced by the cliché that the Church/religion/theology should not “meddle in politics” (Maimela 1987:1). Maimela maintains that in order to do this effectively, the Church has to take up its prophetic mission. Here it is understood that since the Church has the potential for creative love and justice that is concerned with upholding the dignity of all people irrespective of race, gender, class, creed and age in the dynamic historical process of liberation, prophetic witness helps the Church to accommodate people of diverse political affiliations while at the same time maintaining a critical discursive and liberative dialogue.

Maimela shows that historically, too, the Church in apartheid South Africa and in colonial Africa had to redeem itself from collusion with oppression in subtle and overt ways that compromised its prophetic mission. Maimela (1987:9) traces the roots of political apathy in the Church in liberal theology. He explains that the emergence of British liberalism in the 18th and 19th centuries prevented the development of prophetic theology to effectively challenge the brutal colonising process. Instead, the Bible was misused in the development of warped theologies that reinforced the political ideologies of oppressive apartheid and colonial regimes. Maimela (1987:12–18) says that because the Church was identical with the state, English-speaking churches were silent about the evils of colonial oppression. The Afrikaans-speaking churches were silent because they found the oppression of apartheid natural on the basis of subscribing to the “order of creation”. Maimela (1987:7, 17) points out that it remained a big challenge for Black Theology to radically disentangle the Church and theology from prevailing ideologies and oppressive praxis. It is noteworthy that it still remains the task of prophetic Black Theology (of the signs of the time) to work for humanisation beyond Christian fellowship (Roberts 1987:18).

Maimela (1981:44) maintains that believers have no direct access to ultimate truths and he understands hermeneutics as truths that reveal praxis. In critical engagement with the oppressive historical situation, Maimela urges the Church and Christians in general to be on the forefront of change – he advocates a prophetic stance. Consequently, the truths that emerge from Christian historical critical hermeneutics are relative and partial (1981:48).

Black Theology of the signs of the times

Maimela (1981:40–50) makes important observations by pointing to the historical, cultural and political conditioning of the truths of faith. The truths of faith that are enshrined in the Bible have to speak anew to a particular people in time. It is true, as Jesus pointed out, that the poor – and conse-

quently the marginalised and downtrodden – will always be with us (Mk 14:7). Because of socio-economic and political factors, new situations present new problems and these in turn demand new solutions.

Maimela concurs with this view in pointing out that Black Theology as a theology of liberation has an important role to play in a future South Africa where the problem of racial oppression is solved because sin and human limitation and propensity towards evil make it unlikely that human beings will ever create a perfect state of justice. There will always be elements of marginalisation and oppression – be it political, economic or socio-cultural (Maimela 1987:72). In his book *African challenges: unfolding identities* (2009) Du Toit makes this point clear, especially as shown in the transition from apartheid South Africa and colonial Africa to the new democratic, multiracial and techno-scientific South Africa and post-colonial African democracies.

Important observations that are critical to the survival or demise of Black Theology of liberation are that 16 years into democracy in the new South Africa, the gap between the rich and the poor is still widening. There are still thousands of Black people who are protesting against poor service delivery and agitating for land acquisition. Most disturbing of all is that the Black leadership is replicating the old colonial system of governance by implementing policies that benefit a minority and lead to the emergence of Black elites among the political leadership. Furthermore, in a twist of irony, White people now complain of being marginalised through the government's implementation of "black economic empowerment policies", in particular the indigenisation policies to give Black people access to national resources. In 2008 and 2010 in South Africa itself, there were serious cases of xenophobia. The impending 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa will bring with it problems of human trafficking for sex work. Because good nutrition and sanitation contribute to good health, thousands of poor Black people are vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.

When we look at the broader picture of the task of Black Theology in post-colonial Africa, we see that people suffer under dysfunctional tyrannical governments. There is a new phenomenon of power-sharing governments that emanates from incumbent leadership who refuses to concede an election defeat. Clearly, Black Theology should be able to speak to these situations and provide a way forward in terms of transformative liberative praxis. For example, according to Du Toit (2009:97–116), the biggest challenge to the liberation of all people and multicultural living today is the inclusion of African values (*ubuntu* values of communal ontology and solidarity that in turn underlie the African holistic view of life) on the broader agenda of liberating and transforming society.

Conclusion

This article acknowledges Maimela's significant contribution to Black Theology of liberation in South Africa. His theological insights and methodology are inclusive in that he portrays the Christian God as universal – a God who through the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth engages decisively in the creative historical liberation and redemption of all people. Maimela's approach to the liberation of the oppressed and marginalised is prophetic. In his historical critical engagement with the Christian faith in relation to concrete reality and by focusing on the commitment to a transformative liberative praxis, Maimela comes out strong in urging the Church and all Christians to be at the forefront of change. In this way, he gives hope for the survival of Black Theology of the signs of the time in multiracial, multicultural, techno-scientific and globalising post-apartheid and post-colonial Africa. Maimela, then, can be called a theologian of balance.

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