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The theological anthropology of Simon Maimela: Democratisation of power and being human in relationship

Author:
George J. (Cobus) van Wyngaard[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, University of South Africa, South Africa

[2]Faculty of Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Corresponding author:
George van Wyngaard,
vwynggj@unisa.ac.za

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The lacuna around race in (white) Christian theological anthropology has often been pointed out. The canon of academic systematic theology seldom reflects on the implication of modern race and racism for our theological anthropologies and, therefore, fails to provide adequate resources for dealing with one of the most fundamental problems of modern theological anthropology – that the modern human was conceived through a white racial lens. Black theology, in its various streams, has responded with a theological anthropology that consciously disrupted a modern anthropology which thought of 'man' as white (and male). This article analyses the sustained work around theological anthropology of South African Black Theologian Simon Maimela. Maimela over a number of years attempted to articulate the theological problem of white anthropology, or the anthropological problem of white theology, in South Africa. Two dominant pillars are identified in Maimela's theological anthropology and these are connected to the influence of Black theology and African theology on his work, and his attempt at drawing these traditions together. Maimela's theological critique on whiteness will be discussed and key contemporary implications noted.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: While the article is most explicitly situated in the discipline of systematic theology, it challenges dominant narratives on what the theological problem with apartheid was, which also has implications for the broader fields of whiteness studies and critical race studies in South Africa.

Introduction

In what has become a well-known narrative in Reformed circles, Botman (2006) narrates early University of the Western Cape student explorations of apartheid as a theological problem:

> As a student of Professor Jaap Durand in the year 1978, I was challenged, together with the rest of the class, to come to a theological evaluation of the problem of apartheid. He refused to accept our usual legal ('apartheid is a crime against humanity'), political ('apartheid is undemocratic') and economic ('apartheid is an exploitation of human and natural resources') condemnations of apartheid. (p. 240)

In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared apartheid a heresy; it was not merely a legal, political, economic or even an ethical problem, apartheid was a deeply *theological* problem. However, there were different ways of arriving at this conclusion. Why was apartheid a theological problem? What was heretical about apartheid? The answers given to these questions, whether contained in the nuanced language of academic theology or found in the tacit assumptions and embodied practices of people, are closely intertwined with Christian discernment on what the response to apartheid should be, and, I will argue towards the end, will in part determine what we consider appropriate action to be after apartheid.

As illustration, David Bosch and Simon Maimela presented two chapters in the South African publication following the 1982 WARC decision, *Apartheid is a Heresy* (De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983). I will return to Maimela's argument in detail below, but Bosch's (1983) argument is that apartheid is an ecclesiological heresy in that socio-cultural diversity is lifted up to a place where it is more important than the unity of the church. If this is the theological problem, the heresy of apartheid, then the appropriate response is to work for the unity of the (Reformed) church.

This article explores an alternative avenue in describing apartheid as a theological problem by exploring Simon Maimela's theological anthropology, arguing that it provides important resources for understanding how race continues to function theologically beyond the confines of apartheid as a political system. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* published a *Festschrift* responding to Maimela's

work in 2010, but the collection of articles failed to thoroughly explore Maimela's theological anthropology in detail, which will be the main focus of this article.

In the rest of this article, I will first highlight the *lacuna* on race and whiteness in much of white theological anthropology. Thereafter, I will introduce Simon Maimela's[1] argument on apartheid (no, whiteness) as a theological problem. I will conclude by noting some of the implications Maimela's analysis of the anthropology of white theology has in describing the problem of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

Setting the scene: The lacuna on whiteness as problem for theological anthropology

I take as a basic starting point that notions of race have fundamentally shaped modern conceptions of the human. To follow William Jennings' argument, this involved both questions of how the people of the world were connected to each other and how bodies related to space in the formation of identity (Jennings 2011:15–116). This at times revolved around the questions on who can be human, and if human, what kinds of humans there are? And not only was Christianity formed by this racial formation of the human, the very process of conceptualising the human in fundamentally and primarily racial categories was an inherently, if distorted, theological project (Carter 2008:39–121). It is for this reason that I accept that it can be expected that contemporary theological anthropology should critically engage questions of race both in its attempts to describe the development of a Christian idea of the human and also in attempting to construct ways of thinking about being human in a contemporary society still fundamentally marked by modern racism and notions of race. Where this is not happening, there is good reason to name the silence and critically reflect on what is maintained by such a silence, similar to how other silences on race are named.

Elaine Robinson's brief overview of North American theologies, both black[2] and white, indicates a pattern that can be found repeatedly (even while Robinson's overview is by her own admission not exhaustive). Black and Latino/a theologies give priority to reflecting on race in their theological anthropologies, while white theologians ignore race (Robinson 2012:29–53). While Robinson's analysis is mainly focused on textbooks, where anthropology constitutes a single chapter, and an argument could be made that spatial limitations is at play (even while gender and sexuality is indeed important in some of these same introductions), the observations hold beyond this example.

Perhaps no better example can be given than David Kelsey's (2009) *Eccentric Existence*, not because of his greater silence but because of the mere scope of this work on theological anthropology. At beyond 1000 pages, exclusively focused on theological anthropology, and consciously working with the body, it could be expected that the way in which modern notions of race has distorted our theological anthropology (or beyond this, how modern theological anthropology is thoroughly embedded within a racialised context and an important force in forming this racialised context) should at the very least form an explicit part of his analysis. So even the turn to the body does not imply that the canons of North-Atlantic theology (let us name this as white theology) will reflect on one of the key ways in which bodies were given theological meaning: race.[3]

It is within this silence that I will turn to Simon Maimela's anthropological reflections as one attempt at naming race in general, and whiteness in particular, within South African theological anthropology.

Simon Maimela's Black theological anthropology

As a systematic theologian, Maimela reflects on two *loci* in particular. The one is notions of salvation and, in particular, how it relates to history and liberation, and the other is anthropology and, in particular, how it relates to race and racism. These are obviously related, and while the focus of this article is on the latter, the former is always right beneath the surface. Dwight Hopkins already pointed out that it is, however, the latter that is at the core of Maimela's work (Hopkins 1989:109, 197).

Throughout his career, Maimela held that apartheid is at its heart an anthropological problem: the deepest problem with apartheid is that it negates the being of black people (Maimela 1982:59); at its heart, apartheid is the result of an impoverished anthropology (Maimela 1994:2) and after the end of apartheid, he states that:

> when that pessimistic anthropology became embodied in the apartheid ideology and its social structures, it became the greatest single factor that was to result in the division of our racial groups from one another rather than their reconciliation. (Maimela 1997:6)

Without here embarking on a discussion on the extent to which Black theology has a white audience, whether explicit or implicit, and to what extent Black theology should or should not have a white audience, it is still important to note that a number of Maimela's essays were consciously written with a white audience in mind. As a Black theologian, he was

1. In the 2010 *Festschrift* to Simon Maimela, Victor Molobi notes that Maimela, together with Black theology in general has been near forgotten since 1994, but that it has become time to revisit this field, and Maimela in particular (Molobi 2010:16). My own reading of Maimela forms part of a broader project of discerning the implications and call of Black theology for and to white South Africans in a post-apartheid South Africa.

2. Robinson uses the description 'theologies of colour' in the US context, which I translate as 'Black' theology into the South African context. I use 'Black' to refer to all people oppressed by white supremacy and 'Black theology' to refer to those theologies that consciously work from the experience of racial oppression.

3. A thorough discussion of Kelsey's silence on race in his anthropology requires a detailed study on its own. David Ford already mentioned Kelsey's silence on matters of sex and gender (Ford 2011:51), and a question along the same lines (the fact that Kelsey himself claims that theology should reflect on the relation to current culture) can be made for race. Kelsey responded by noting that questions of gender, sex and race (Kelsey adds race even though Ford did not raise questions about race) are indeed important, but he considers this to be outside our basic identity in Christ and therefore left these for a later project (2011:80). Even if this argument does make sense within Kelsey's project, we have to note that through this Kelsey repeats the pattern that Robinson discussed.

at a number of points asked to reflect on the implication of Black theology for white South Africans in late-apartheid South Africa.[4] But even beyond this, Maimela often seems to consciously write with a white audience in the back of his mind.[5] However, Black theology in South Africa, and Maimela in particular, also worked with the idea that while it addresses the oppressed black people, it hopes that white people will also listen and be liberated (Maimela 1984:47). I therefore read Maimela both in his conscious address to white South Africans, but even more as one listening to his Black anthropology as a challenge to white racism.

Maimela's constructive proposal for theological anthropology rests on two pillars that I will describe in my analysis as the democratisation of power and a relational anthropology. In his final argument[6] on theological anthropology, he consciously presents them as two sides to his proposal, but they appear repeatedly with different emphases in various publications from the early 1980s.

It can be argued that in these two pillars Maimela is also attempting to draw together Black theology and African theology, a relation that was under sustained debate during the time when he reflected on anthropology, in particular in Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) where Maimela played an active role (Molobi 2010:21) and where he in a 1991 keynote address also consciously opened up this split and attempted to indicate ways in which these two streams could be weaved together (Maimela 1991 a:1–3). The argument on the democratisation of power is more explicitly related to the Black theology struggle for liberation while his suggestion for a relational anthropology is more explicitly presented as an African contribution to theology.

Emphasising the anthropological aspects of Maimela's critique should not be read as an attempt at shying away from the material reality underpinning racism. In 1979 Maimela explicitly identified himself with those who attempt to see class and race together (Hopkins 1989:111) and in a 1998 introduction on Black theology Maimela places himself in the black-solidarity materialist stream (Maimela 1998:116).[7] In the repeated description of the context as involving dehumanisation and oppression, which call for transformation of humanity and society, he describes the overarching goal as justice:

> Therefore the elimination of sin requires greater effort than the conversion of few pious individuals. Its elimination demands a radical liberation and transformation of humanity itself as well as the transformation of society. This happens when men and women together with God struggle to build up a just society (*sic*.). (Maimela 1990a:54)

That said, behind the injustice of apartheid, Maimela described an impoverished and heretical theological anthropology.

I turn first to his constructive anthropological vision, which acts as a mirror for noting the anthropological deficiencies of whiteness. In this vision, we see Maimela (1982) enfleshing what he believed the task of theology should be:

> Even more important it [*theology*] must become involved in the creation of a humane picture of the world, a world which shall be attractive enough to motivate human beings to invest their time, energy and creative potentialities to realize it. (p. 64)

Democratising power

Perhaps falling into the trap of a lack of dialogue between systematic theologians and biblical scholars (Middleton 2005:24), Maimela describes the creation *imago dei* as a 'momentous biblical conclusion' (Maimela 1994:6) and describes his reflection in the *imago dei* as a biblical reflection[8]. Exegetically, Maimela does not even attempt to keep to those texts that inform the notion of the *imago dei*, but draws freely on various other scriptural sources, and I would argue from the agenda of Black theology, to develop his anthropology around the notion of the *imago dei*. The *imago dei* is found only in Genesis 1–11 (Middleton 2005:16) and New Testament texts reflecting on Christ as the image of God is both limited in number and is not simply a reflection on Old Testament instances where this notion is found (Kelsey 2009:936). Still, the *imago dei* has become a key notion in the history of theology, and the limited biblical references by no means disqualify Maimela from constructively developing this notion as a way of opposing racism. The key argument Maimela makes in relation to the *imago dei* does, however, have strong exegetical support in the Genesis 1 text, as I will indicate below.

On a more general note, Maimela connects the *imago dei* to notions of human dignity, value, and human uniqueness on various levels (Maimela 1994:7–9), including humans being religious and communal beings (Maimela 1994:11–13). While such an emphasis has an obvious critical function in contexts of oppression, where the dignity of humans is being trampled upon (cf. Maimela 1984:42), and while this is indeed connected to a positive anthropology, Maimela's positive anthropology should not be reduced to considering humans as valuable, to 'his view on the goodness and beauty of being

4.See, for example, the introduction to *Man in 'White' Theology*, where he reflects on the difficulty of being asked to speak on White anthropology (Maimela 1981), or the conclusion to *Black Power and Black Theology*, where he explicitly calls on white Christians to listen to Black Christians, and explain the need for Black Power in a way that is only relevant to a white audience (Maimela 1984:49). John de Gruchy's response to this last mentioned paper also reveal that this is an explicit purpose of the paper (De Gruchy 1984:50).

5.See for example an argument published in the *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, in which he argues that: 'I believe it is the calling and challenge that face the Black Church to begin to call the Churches and Christians in this land to account for what they do in their relationships with their racially different neighbours in the light of what they teach and profess every Sunday' (Maimela 1988:25). Whether Maimela intends to include the Black church and black Christians in his calling to account for relations with neighbours of a different race is open for interpretation, but regardless, it should be clear that he intends that the Black Church should call white Christians and churches to account.

6.The 1994 essay *What is the human being?* is both the most extensive explicit argument on theological anthropology and also the last he wrote academically on the topic. The later and shorter essay on the topic (Maimela 1997) was mostly a duplication of a section of the 1994 essay. It is, however, important to note that he already presented in a brief outline in 1981 (Maimela 1981:39–40) the main points of what he developed more fully in 1994.

7.In this, Maimela associates himself with Mosala, whom he places in the same category, and who is perhaps the best known from this time for bringing together Black theology with Marxist class analysis (Kee 2006:87).

8.The 1997 republication of the first part of the 1994 lecture on what is a human being is presented as a 'biblical reflection' on what is a human being. In a much shorter reflection in 1981, he also presents his anthropology as a biblical view (Maimela 1981:38).

human' (Landman 2010:55)[9], even though he does, perhaps we might say obviously, consider humanity, both in general and black humanity in particular, to be beautiful and good.

Rather, the point in which Maimela's positive anthropology is most clearly expressed, and which ties together his arguments over a number of years, concerns the power given to human beings. In the *imago dei*, Maimela notes that 'human beings can representatively act on earth as the Godself would have acted' (Maimela 1994:7). Noting the difficulty of giving content to the *imago dei*, and after mentioning two dominant interpretations of the *imago dei* throughout history, and pointing out their limitations, Maimela (1994) finally states that:

> God's image in humans has to be understood in terms both of human living relationships to their surroundings and of their calling to a dynamic task and vocation of becoming sharers of God's creative nature. (p. 16)

Maimela's positive anthropology must be read as positive not only about the value of human beings but optimistic about the potential of human beings to transform their worlds, about the *power* of humanity. He argues that:

> the idea of divine image should be understood as referring to the divine empowerment of men and women, granting to them of the ability to create and produce the world and to structure human interrelationships for the furtherance of history. (Maimela 1994:17)

He also defines the divine image as humans' 'empowerment to become the co-creators with God, within the overall context of divine creativity' (Maimela 1994:20). Exegetically, Maimela draws this explicitly from a reading of human dominion in Genesis 1 (Maimela 1994:20–21).

However, the explicit development of human empowerment as a notion in a Black theology of liberation can only be understood when noting Maimela's insistence on what I would call the democratisation of power. The problem with colonialism is the monopolising of the vocation of creative agency, excluding black people from God's task of having dominion over the earth and being agents of history (Maimela 1994:23–24). This is the heart of Maimela's positive anthropology: that humanity is empowered to be God's co-creators, but more specifically, that *all* humanity is empowered in this way, and that the anthropology allowing power to be monopolised so that some are denied participation in having agency over history is therefore heretical. Maimela also reads the Genesis text to say that this dominion by definition excludes dominion over other human beings (Maimela 1994:29).[10]

While the argument above is drawn from the latest iteration of Maimela's theological anthropology, in retrospect it is clear that this emphasis on empowerment was key to Maimela's anthropology from the beginning. As an example, when arguing for a theology of humanisation in 1982, he writes 'it is in their power to make the world into something in which every human being can enjoy freedom and social justice' (Maimela 1982:63). Elsewhere, he acknowledges the importance of affirming black humanity and goodness (black is beautiful) but immediately states that this is connected to the affirmation that one 'has the right to determine one's destiny' (Maimela 1984:42). He pre-empts the argument that he will develop more fully a decade later by writing in summary that Black theology seeks to show that concerning black people 'God loves them and has created them in his image and has given them full authority to have dominion over their created selves and over their environment' (Maimela 1984:46). Dwight Hopkins also noted this emphasis in his 1989 study on Black theology in South Africa and the USA, pointing out that it is through such a democratisation of power that we can speak of a theology of reconciliation in Maimela's work – taking joint responsibility (Hopkins 1989:112). In summary, the argument that a Christian anthropology insists on not only human dignity but also on human power and agency is visible throughout his career, although he develops this more systematically as an essay in theological anthropology towards the end of his academic writing.

Middleton's (2005) detailed study on the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1 makes an argument for a reading of the *imago dei* as drawing on Mesopotamian royal metaphors, where the king is the image of the gods on earth, and therefore has a particular task of ruling. However, the Genesis 1 text function as a critique of this royal ideology by connecting the image of God to *all* humanity, therefore a democratisation of power (Middleton 2005:205). Maimela's insistence in emphasising the empowerment connected with the *imago dei* is not argued on such detailed exegetical grounds, but it can both be exegetically justified (following Middleton) and also developed as a theological rationale for a key aspect of Black theology: the need for Black Power.

As part of an argument explaining to a white audience why Black Power (which Maimela equates with Black Consciousness[11]) and Black theology is important, Maimela simply states that a new South Africa is only possible by moving through Black Power and Black theology (Maimela 1984:49) which means that one has the 'right to determine one's destiny' (Maimela 1984:42).[12] Given the argument

9. Both Landman's (2010:55–56) and Fick's (2013:339–340) overview of Maimela's anthropology reduce his positive anthropology to notions of beauty and goodness. However, neither of them make reference to Maimela's most comprehensive essay on theological anthropology, *What is the human?*, from 1994, where the argument on the *imago Dei* and empowerment of most explicitly unpacked. Still, the older overview of Hopkins, written before this 1994 essay, and not cited by either Landman or Fick, already noted that Maimela's anthropology is aimed at arguing that humans have the power to change their circumstances and the world (Hopkins 1989:109–111).

10. Although Maimela's theological point is clear, his exegetical argument jumps between Genesis 1 and 2 in a contradictory way which attempts to argue his point from the place in the narrative where Eve is created, but leading to contradictory statements since Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 cannot be harmonised on such a narrative level. If we, however, assume that Genesis 1 is the primary text that Maimela works with, then his argument is that since Adam and Eve were both created before the mandate for subjugation, dominion over other humans is clearly excluded from this mandate.

11. Maimela himself at one point seems to consider Black Power and Black Consciousness to be closely related if not synonymous (Maimela 1984:45). Although Maimela does not quote Steve Biko, Mogashoa notes that Maimela seem to be drawing on Biko's 1971 essay *Fear – an Important Determinant in South African Politics* (Biko 2012 [1978]:80–87) for his notion of Black Power in writing *Black Power and Black Theology*. Mosahoa, however, seems to be unaware that *Black Power and Black Theology* was published in 1984 and therefore incorrectly reads the 1987 republication (Maimela 1987:63–74) against the background of the rubicon speech and resulting events.

12. It is important to read this together with his emphasis on community and interpersonal relations, and the creative and life-giving possibilities when people from different backgrounds connect – in brief, Maimela is not in any way advocating for any form of 'group self-determination', this is explicitly about every individual having agency.

above, we should see an anthropological vision where true humanity and true community is dependent on a democratisation of power, on everyone being allowed the agency to contribute to determining their own future.

This strong emphasis on dominion however warrants at least a brief note on ecology. From a contemporary ecotheological perspective, Maimela could be described as anthropocentric in his optimistic anthropology. There is a strong line of argument in which humans are sketched as being outside of 'nature', and where the value of creation is reduced to its support for human life, rather than having value for its own sake.[13] I note this first merely for pointing out what would be obvious in a contemporary more ecologically sensitive reading, but also because I think that the liberating anthropology, even when anthropocentric, contains an interesting, if unintended, ecological upshot. In insisting on the democratisation of power there is also a rejection of conquest and of colonial rulers or ethnic and tribal domination of the land of others and individualised fencing of the land to keep others from it (Maimela 1994:23–24). In ecological perspective, this calls for humanity *as a whole* having dominion over the earth by humans having dominion, that is, creative agency, over the local earth and land on which we live, and for humanity as a whole sharing creative agency for all the earth, rather than only some monopolising this agency. Arguably, our contemporary ecological crisis is at least in part the result of the extent to which those who control creative capacity is disconnected from the land which is being drawn upon for resources, allowing for the destruction of land on which others depend without needing to consider how it impacts on the self. Maimela's own conclusion, not set in ecological perspective but with clear ecological implications, is that God's command for co-creativity should result in a transformation of the world 'into one which is supportive of life' (Maimela 1994:30).

Being human in relationship

Without enforcing a too strict division into Maimela's work, a second and distinct development in his theological anthropology can be discerned. Maimela merges these two lines of argument in numerous places, perhaps most comprehensively in the last pages of *What is a human?* (Maimela 1994:25–30). Noting the distinct arguments can assist in gaining clarity on his proposal. I distinguish between these two lines of argument not only due to difference in emphasis but also difference in sources. As pointed out above, the emphasis on empowerment of humans is presented as a biblical argument (even if arguably not a strictly exegetical argument). While it is obviously possible to make the point that human beings are inherently relational from biblical arguments, and Maimela at times do follow this line, he mostly develops an argument from African anthropology, therefore from culture and experience[14], for this part of his anthropology, even while this is also described as being in line with the Bible.[15]

One of the questions that Maimela addresses in a number of places is what the African contribution to the Christian faith would be (cf. Maimela 1988, 1990b, 1991a). He sketches African culture as being built on an anthropology which sees the human as being human in community, 'which is the hallmark of African anthropology' (Maimela 1991a:5). Every human is therefore tasked with maintaining this healthy network of relationships, both with the community and the ancestors, and elaborate practices and rituals exist to protect this network of interpersonal relationships (Maimela 1988:22).

The result of this relational anthropology is that sin is understood primarily, if not exclusively[16], as that which disrupts interpersonal relations, that leads to the breakdown in community, rather than the breaking of divine laws. This is related to the well-known distinction between a vertical and horizontal dimension to faith, and Maimela argues that this horizontal dimension has been underemphasised in the history of theology. The relational is directly connected to this horizontal dimension and described as the contribution which the Black Church, drawing on African resources, must make to the church at large:

> This African perspective on anthropology, which looks at life holistically in terms of the multiple relationships in which life is lived, the perspective that lays greater stress on the social wrongs and evils which humans commit against their fellows, is one which *Black* theologians should lift up and offer as *African* contribution to theological reflection on the great questions of sin and salvation. (Maimela 1988:22, [*author's own emphasis*])[17]

What is important is that he presents his theological anthropology consciously by drawing from experience and

13. See, for example, his argument for the primary task of theology as humanisation, where a strong distinction is made between 'jungle/Eden' and 'city/Jerusalem', with our task being to work for the latter where he argues that 'our primary human responsibility to construct, nurture and change social structures so that they might serve human needs better and better' (Maimela 1982:62–63). Maimela is also explicit that this constructive task involves manipulation of the environment for human needs, so that his argument can be read as stating that the environment exists for the sake of serving humans.

14. Maimela argues for an African contribution in at least two ways. One can be described as a naïve reading of both the Bible and the notion of 'Africa' by presenting examples of the contributions of those in what is now called North Africa to the Jewish and Christian faith, such as the Egyptians sheltering Abraham and Jesus (Maimela 1990b:70–71). The other is a more conscious form of enculturation (Maimela 1991a:1) in dialogue with African culture. I ignore the first and focus exclusively on the second.

15. The primary exegetical argument Maimela repeatedly invokes is that Genesis 3 and 4 need to be kept together, but was separated from each other in White/Western theology so that Genesis 3 was read without noting its implication for the relationships between humans (Maimela 1990b:72–73, 1991a:13, 1991b:10–11).

16. Maimela remains slightly vague on whether sin is exclusively what happens between humans, or whether some transgression against the divine that is not also a transgression against another is possible. See, for example, the contrast between the following two sentences appearing right after each other, where the first is slightly more hesitant, but the second make a stronger claim: 'Sin is understood *more* in terms of the evil that people do to or perpetuate against one another than in terms of the human transgression of the divine law against God. In other words, Africans *do not think* of sin and evil in terms of an abstract legalistic structure through which human beings relate to God either by obeying or disobeying the Supreme Being outside and beyond the social life in which individuals live as social selves' (Maimela 1990b:74, [*author's own emphasis*]). In the broader argument, it does, however, seem to become clear that Maimela is leaning towards the latter argument, where not God but humans suffer because of their sin, although the Creator God is offended by these actions that cause suffering (Maimela 1990b:75). But if humans, individually and as a community, are the object of sin, that does not mean that humans only are the subjects of sin and evil, within Maimela's description of an African worldview various forces contribute to sin (Maimela 1991b:6–7).

17. Although Maimela often uses this interplay of an African contribution which Black theologians should pick up and contribute to the broader church, elsewhere he use this exact same words but instead of Black theologians here he refers to African theologians (Maimela 1991b:12). The difference can be explained by looking at the broader focus of each argument, with the 1988 version speaking to challenges of the Black church and the 1991 version more specifically to the contribution of African theology.

culture, in this case what is considered a valuable contribution from African experience and culture. While he presents this as being in line with scripture (Maimela 1988:23–24), it is not dependent on scripture for its truth and contribution. Finally, while drawing from African experience and culture, he presents this not as a provincial idea but as a contribution made to the church and society as a whole.

Concerning the question of sources in theology, there is a moment in Maimela's work that hints towards a more decisive break with the project of what he would describe as traditional theology. This possible break is found in him throwing down the gauntlet to Black theology. In a 1993 publication, Maimela critiques Black theology for its naïve use of scripture and its attempts at convincing others that its view of God is free from ideological distortion. Rather, Maimela argues that Black theology should take full responsibility for its own claims, arguing that the truth of Black theology is not necessarily found in superior interpretation of scripture, but rather in its moral or practical value: Black theology speaks about God in a way that works for 'liberating the black people from oppression, thus leading them to realize their fuller humanity', and the truth of Black theology should be determined by its effectiveness (Maimela 1993:61–66). This stands in sharp contrast to language of a more 'biblical' perspective found earlier, for example, in contradicting 'biblical anthropology' with 'White anthropology' (Maimela 1981:29) or in arguing that biblical arguments are more authoritative than arguments from culture and history and forms the 'true basis of the knowledge of what the human is' (Maimela 1981:38). But arguably Maimela never works out the implication of such a decisive break concerning sources of theology in his work, it is rather a more creative tension between black and African experience and scripture and tradition that form his theology.

The heresy of white theological anthropology

Against this background Maimela's theological critique of white anthropology, or anthropological question to white theology, becomes clear. I point to three theological critiques, giving a more expanded explanation of the first, which is not directly related to his positive proposals, and a more brief explanation on the last two, which is the mirror image of his positive proposals.

Maimela is quite explicit in stating that the problem of white racism is not found in the classic statements of Christian anthropology or how they are appropriated in contemporary white churches (1981:27–28).[18] If we want to understand the problem of theology we need to focus on how it is being enacted.

There is a problem that Maimela is attempting to describe and make sense of, or perhaps an utterly strange anthropological phenomenon that Maimela (1981) attempts to frame in Christian perspective:

> the concept of 'man' in White theology is one of the most difficult for an outsider, that is, one who is not White, to analyse and to try to make sense of. This is because the portrait or construal of what is constitutive of the human that White theology offers its readers strikes a Black person as a creature with which he cannot identify himself. For human self ('man') as portrayed in White theology is an incurably dangerous monster. (p. 27)

He continues to make the explicit claim that 'biblical anthropology and white anthropology are mutually exclusive and contradictory, running on parallel paths that can never meet' (Maimela 1981:29). This claim needs to be read in light of the thread on what a 'biblical' anthropology would be, as outlined above.

If Maimela's theology can be described as building on a positive anthropology, then the negative to which this is a response if found in his description of white anthropology. The problem with white anthropology, and given the description above it should be clear that this problem amounts to the heretical in Maimela's view, is that it holds to a view of humans which says that humans are uncontrollably caught up in cycles of domination and force, having a 'portrait of a world in which every human self is the enemy of every other human', where 'human interrelations can never be creative and positive because ultimately each human poses a danger to all the others' and finally, 'White anthropology continues to teach us that humans have uncontrollable fratricidal drives which even the Gospel and conversion cannot tame' (Maimela 1981:31–32).

The result is that history is read through this lens, so that history becomes a narrative of conflicts, ignoring the positive and creative interactions between diverse peoples[19] and apartheid is then considered absolutely necessary in order to keep apart people who are 'by design and nature bent on destroying each other' (Maimela 1981:33).[20] Maimela is not blind to the very real violence and oppression found in history, and acknowledges that this can indeed lead us into the temptation of a negative anthropology, and he does not advocate a naïve community where oppressed peoples ignore the potential violence that can result from certain relationships. What he does, however, vehemently oppose is the fatalism that he reads in a white anthropology.

Secondly, traditional Western theology became so obsessed with the salvation of the individual that it made sin out to be primarily about transgressions against the divine,

18. It is, however, possible to also read this as a rhetorical device, bordering on a homiletic strategy, which highlights a shared Christian identity and then indicates how white actions reveal a break with the explicitly confessed Christian identity. Given that Maimela also poses questions to the orthodoxy of Christian (protestant) anthropology, in particularly the way the total depravity of humans are used (Maimela 1981:35–36), I suggest that Maimela's sharp distinction between white theoretical and practical views of man, where he praises the theoretical and critiques the practical, makes more sense if read as such a rhetorical device. Read in this way Maimela follows a classic strategy of Black theology in South Africa which acknowledges the professed Christianity of white South Africans and even the South African government (cf. Maimela 1982:58, 1988:25), and then calls out white Christians for not living up to this confession.

19. For this, Maimela explicitly emphasises that a true history of South Africa, while including much conflict, should also indicate 'cooperative, friendly, and mutually creative efforts' between indigenous Africans and European settlers (Maimela 1981:32, 34).

20. Sullivan (2014) reflects in the US context how the biological reactions white people have as a result of racial fears are used as an argument to 'naturalise' such fear. The argument would then go that since I'm physiologically fearful (heartbeat races when I walk through a neighbourhood racialised as black), this has to be natural. What her argument would reveal is that the negative anthropology which Maimela describe impacts on white physiological responses to black people.

making it possible for white theology to justify that one can remain racist even though you are a Christian. Writing on this split between the horizontal and vertical dimension to sin he states:

> [*W*]hite theology seems to suggest that it is possible for Whites to be saved and yet remain racist oppressors while at the same time remaining in good standing in the Church. (Maimela 1990b:73)

This distinction is impossible within the relational anthropology that Maimela presents, where salvation is concerned with the restoration of community.

Thirdly, following from the argument that the implication of the creation *imago dei* is that humans have dominion over the earth, should not have dominion over other humans, and that all of humanity is created to have dominion, Maimela argues that white theology has justified that dominion was made exclusive to a certain class of people and this class of people have dominion over other people (Maimela 1994:24).

It is against the background of this theological anthropology that we should read Maimela's core critique on apartheid, which, exactly because of his focus on the anthropological nature of the heresy, is a critique on whiteness rather than apartheid. Maimela's critique is then not simply on the political system of apartheid but on the anthropology that underlay this system, and because it goes beyond apartheid continues to have a direct implication for our reading of whiteness in South Africa after apartheid. So let me conclude by drawing out some brief implications for contemporary discussions of whiteness.

The critique in contemporary perspective

Maimela's work is a particular description of the more general recognition that white racism also disrupts the humanity of white people. Working from a Christian vision infused by an African anthropology and a Black liberation reading of the Bible, he cuts the wounds open to reveal aspects of what is broken in white humanity. Following his main constructive proposals, we can summarise this as an anthropology which does not see itself as fully in interrelation with all other people, and that disconnect being human together from an equitable distribution of power and creative agency.

If we are to follow through on Maimela's anthropology, then we need to constantly keep human dignity and human agency together. The temptation to separate these remain constantly visible when the quest for dignity is reduced to addressing the various material needs of people on their behalf without committing to a society where people have agency in the history that determines their own future and space to creatively contribute to society. This insistence on empowerment and human agency as inherent to a Christian anthropology seem to remain missing in much contemporary discourse, even while dignity is strongly emphasised.

While Kee[21] (2006:87) sees the relevance of Black theology after the demise of apartheid exclusively in its appropriation of a class analysis, which reveals how apartheid political-economy is perpetuated in a democratic South Africa, Maimela's anthropological work opens up another route for a critical engagement of race both sides of 1994. By emphasising the anthropological Maimela insists that the question of race cannot be reduced to a particular political system, nor to its incidental overlap with class oppression. The problem is also with dehumanising systems and anthropological assumptions, which in (Black)[22] Christian perspective is heretical. Reinforced by a racist political and economic system, and therefore disrupted when these intersecting systems are disrupted, this anthropology can also survive independently of such. Maimela's emphasis on the anthropological nature of the problem highlights that political transitions is by their very nature not a resolution to the problem of whiteness, important as the political changes in South Africa have been. Disrupting an anthropology implies disrupting the very idea that we hold of humanity.

Maimela is not blind to the ecclesiological problems resulting from this anthropological heresy. He notes that the response of the white church is to convince white people that they are Christians 'in good standing' even though they are 'sinning against Christian unity and the third article of the Creed', that is, 'I believe in One, Holy and Apostolic Church …' (Maimela 1981:34). However, where Maimela differs from approaches that primarily note the ecclesiological problems resulting from racism is by insisting that this ecclesiological problem is the result of a much deeper anthropological heresy that need to be addressed.

Conclusion

At the heart of Simon Maimela's theology is a liberating anthropology presented in opposition to a white racist theological anthropology. The core elements of this anthropology are a commitment to the democratisation of power and being human in relationship. The effects of a white anthropology are visible on both sides of a democratic dispensation in South Africa. Maimela's work therefore presents one aspect of the theological challenge to whiteness in South Africa that remains significant.

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21. See, for example, his claim that 'If racism is the agenda then Black theology becomes redundant with the end of apartheid' (Kee 2006:87) and the resulting argument that the relevance of Black theology after apartheid is exclusively found in a class analysis.

22. Sensitive to Maimela's own call that not even Black theology should present its arguments as final, not even if drawn from scripture, I suggest that Maimela's earlier picture of white theology as heretical should be presented as coming from a particular position (as does all theological claims).

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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