

An Appraisal of Gunther Wittenberg's Theology of Hope in post-1994 South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa's reluctance to deploy religion in the public sphere can be understood in terms of the country's political and socioeconomic trajectories from the apartheid era. Theology has always featured in the struggle history of the majority of the Black population, but has been neglected by most historians and theologians in the face of crises facing the country today. This article examines Wittenberg's theocratisation of the "theology of hope" as a means of redressing this apparent neglect, highlighting the invaluable role of the church in the struggle against apartheid. During the early 1990s, Wittenberg's ideas became a force to reckon with in challenging the negative impact of apartheid policies on Black people. I focus on Wittenberg because of his rich experience and knowledge of Lutheran theology. The main aim of this article, therefore, is to elaborate on the significance of the theology of hope in the context of a democratic South Africa amid unprecedented political and socioeconomic crises. I have adopted secondary data analysis and experientialism as research approaches for this paper.

Keywords: apartheid; democracy, Wittenberg; liberation; South Africa; theology of hope

Introduction

Several political, social and economic issues contend for the attention of social science analysts today. Before majority rule in 1994, debates ranged from liberation to contextual readings of the Bible in the face of the apartheid system (see, for example, Boesak 1978; Buthelezi 1974; Goba 1974; Motlhabi 1974; Tutu 1974). In addition to individual self-expression through pen and paper, also known as "protest writing" (Gaylard 2008, 19), political rallies, seminars, conferences and roundtables in and outside the country were organised and intensified in protest against apartheid. The resistance paid off with the release of the Rivonia political prisoners, namely Walter



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Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, on 11 February 1990 (Limb 2008). The nation became serious about the possibility of a majority Black government. The period under scrutiny was not without challenges, as killings and violence engulfed most townships. In the KwaZulu-Natal province, within townships such as KwaMakhutha, Ndwedwe and Caluza (adjacent to Pietermaritzburg) residents were shot and killed, and it is reported that the Inkhatha Freedom Party wreaked havoc in eight regions in Pietermaritzburg. Likewise, in Gauteng, townships such as Thokoza and Katlehong experienced what Kynoch (2013, 283) termed “communal violence.” Theological reflections at the time became inquisitive and animated against an oppressive system that undermined human life. I have chosen to focus on Gunther Wittenberg for the present discussion because his writings influenced and impacted the South African theological discourse of the early 1990s and beyond.

The current situation in democratic South Africa (at the time of writing this article in January 2022) has become even more complex than ever as new issues and challenges have emerged. Some examples will suffice: the HIV/AIDS pandemic remains a challenge; Covid-19 has not only decimated our nation but also halted economic productivity (Carruthers 2020, 1); poverty and unemployment continue to be stubbornly high¹; crime continues to soar; there is pervasive public corruption, which appears to be shrinking the little that is left of the economy of the nation; we experience sluggish service delivery by government departments; and there is a pervasive feeling of anxiety, drift and foreboding of imminent social collapse. Our society is facing a broken and failed state (Bates 2008, 1–12; Call 2011, 303–326). These problems have led to a spate of violence and protests by communities across the country. Questions are now being raised on the value of the resistance waged against apartheid for many years that claimed lives both inside and outside the country.

It is in this context that I propose the need for a new direction; one that begins with a reflection on the significance and appropriateness of Wittenberg’s theology of hope. I explore selected works of Wittenberg in order to establish their relevance for the current South African situation. In this regard, I attempt to show that Wittenberg had a calling for a rediscovery of a “theological-episteme of hope.” I argue that a rereading of the theme of the theology of hope from Wittenberg’s studies in South Africa today will reinvigorate pertinent theologisation processes. Given the methodologies preferred for this inquiry, I will not expend energies to “reinvent the wheel” (Van der Merwe 2016, 581). Instead, I will demonstrate the ways in which Wittenberg’s scholarship in regard to the theme under investigation will assist in developing the present argument to its logical conclusion. Finally, I recommend strategies for the ways in which the church and theologians can contribute to addressing the political and socio-economic problems confronting South Africa today.

1 Stats SA (2021) reported the unemployment rate in South Africa as 26.32%. This might have increased by the time of writing.

Research Method

The present study utilises two research approaches: 1) secondary data analysis; and 2) experientialism. The research has benefited a great deal from previous sources, which include contributions by Gunther Wittenberg. The present research owes its development processes to the insights drawn from existing sources.

Experientialism has to do with lived realities and experiences. One might describe it in terms of personal observation and witnessing (Massyn 2009) conceived of as “experiential learning.” It is in this context that I intend to draw attention to the experiences of South Africans as invaluable sources of history. It has been demonstrated that experience influences scholarship to an extent. According to Bolhuis (2003, 330), “[l]earning is context-bound, and involves hands-on manipulating, experiential learning and learning in social interaction in a socio-material situation or community of practice.” In terms of religion, Acquah (2011, 148) opines that “any examination of religion from an African perspective has to take into account the notion of the sacred as a reality in the African religious experience.” Thompson (2013, xii) describes experientialism as apprenticeship, adding that “it is experientially based; the apprentice learns ‘on the job’” (see also Andrews 2002, 21). This view is supported by MacLellan and Soden (2004, 254), who argue that “individuals (and groups) should adapt to and make sense of their experiential worlds.”

Statement of the Problem

While there are lots of works on the history of apartheid in South Africa, not much has been discussed, since 1994, about the role and contribution of theology in the clamour for liberation. In fact, the readership is privileged to have theologians like Simon Maimela, Itumeleng Mosala, Gunther Wittenberg, and Desmond Tutu, among others, who braved the storm of apartheid. Because of the ruthless nature of apartheid, very few writers dared criticise the oppressive system. Gunther Wittenberg stands out among the few theologians who wrote and published works on liberation theology. It could be said that the church during this period had taken another dimension by moving from the pulpit to the political field.

It is against this background that the present study explores the theology of hope which, I believe, motivated the readership that was familiar with Wittenberg’s contributions to democratic rule in South Africa. By revisiting Wittenberg’s theology of hope, the present research seeks to challenge the current readership, the ruling elite and the general public to focus more intuitively on salvaging the socioeconomic crises devastating South Africans today. Concerning gender disparity, Dube (2000, 20) has argued that women “not only suffer the yoke of colonial oppression but also endure the burden of two patriarchal systems imposed on them.” One could say that Dube’s observation is also true of all Black South Africans, regardless of gender, in the post-apartheid era. In my view, apartheid policies just changed hands, from White supremacists to the Black bourgeoisie. One can change the pot from which a number of

people are being fed, but the poison remains as potent! The post-apartheid South African government treats its Black masses in practically the same way their racist predecessors did. Poverty has been exacerbated by the very same Black people in power, which is why Ramantswana (2016, 189) lamented that “those in power tend to thrive at the expense of the poor.”

The Bible and the Concept of Hope

There are numerous verses on the concept of hope in the Bible, and these apparently account for Wittenberg’s focus and scholarship on the subject. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes (9:4) says: “He who is joined with all the living has hope,” while Zechariah 9:11–12 regards the covenant as the basis for hope, which makes God’s people “prisoners of hope” (verse 12). According to Lamentations, the book traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah, “The Lord is my portion ... therefore I will hope in him” (3:24). The psalmist looks up to and waits upon the Lord as his hope (Psalm 62; 65; 71; 130, etc.). In the New Testament, the Pauline letters explicate a great deal about hope (e.g., Rom. 15:9–12; 2 Cor. 1:10). In the book of First Timothy (6:17), Paul urges rich people “not to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God, who richly furnishes us with everything we enjoy.” Furthermore, he writes that “We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10). In Acts 26:6, Paul states in self-defence that “I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers.” This hope, according to Paul, was that “there will be the resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15). In addition to the biblical teachings, Wittenberg might also have been familiar with Jürgen Moltmann’s scholarship, particularly his “Theology of Hope” (1967).

For his part, Moltmann (1967), apparently motivated by Scripture, writes: “What is missing is the gospel of the kingdom of God that Jesus himself proclaimed. What is missing is the hope of the all-encompassing promise of God who is coming” (Moltman 1967, 4). To Moltmann (1967, 194): “The Christian hope for the future comes of observing a specific unique event, that of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Moltmann’s notion of resurrection was not missed by Jon Sobrino (1978, 257), who wrote: “Knowing the resurrection of Jesus is not something that is given once and for all: We keep creating our horizon of understanding, and we must keep alive our hope and praxis of love at every moment.” The above verses reinforce the idea of the resurrection as hope, as is stated by Paul in Acts 24:15. In her article, “Hope in the Dark Times: Theological Accounts of Hope as Critical Resources for Coping with Political Defeatism,” Svenungsson (2019, 193–206) posits that “Jewish and Christian discourses on hope can contribute in a critical way to contemporary political and philosophical discussions of hope.” This aligns strongly with the thrust of Wittenberg’s work. In my view, Moltmann (1968), in “Towards a Political Hermeneutics of the Gospel,” was appealing for a hermeneutics that encompasses the emancipating thrust of the gospel to be presented to a real and existing world, rather than the hermeneutics that remains trapped within the pages of the Bible. Although he does not mention Wittenberg,

Forster's (2015) "What Hope is there for South Africa?" also influences the present inquiry into Wittenberg's work on the theology of hope for South Africa.

Since the inception of apartheid, the Bible has been very useful in responses to the distresses, mourning, exclusion, oppression and injustice of the evil system. As was observed elsewhere (Masoga 2001, 133–147), "[t]he importance of the Bible had to be extended to other spaces which were undermined and periphered by powerful institutions." Along these lines, Maimela (1987, preface) had previously opined that:

Black theology turned the gospel into the gospel ethos to resist the extreme demands of racial domination and bondage. In proclaiming liberty to the poor, the oppressed and the downtrodden, Black theology of liberation witnesses to the biblical God who has shown special concern for those who are trampled underfoot by the powers that be in any society. It inspires hope for the oppressed groups who must become partners with God in building up a more humane society that is liberated and free but also Black and White Christians working for justice for everyone before, during and after liberation from racial bondage so that in the new liberated South African rulers are prevented from becoming oppressors of themselves and therefore promoters of injustice and unfreedom.

Maimela's idea of the "theological idea of hope" anticipated a future beyond the dismantling of apartheid. Maimela (1989, 2), whom I regard as a contemporary of Wittenberg (both ordained Lutheran Ministers), argues thus: "I cannot for a moment pretend that I read Luther's theology as a neutral or objective person but as an extremely interested and conditioned Lutheran who hopes to find solutions, however indirect, to the problems that confront us." He urges the present generation of readers not to be unconscious of the prevailing circumstances and to reflect on earlier theological voices that had "prophesied" and hoped for the new democratic dispensation. Meanwhile, the new dispensation is now mired in political and socioeconomic problems. I propose that the current situation can be improved through a strategy that includes theological reformulations characterised by a strong sense of hope. In this regard, the key role of biblical theology in emancipating societies cannot be ignored. In my view, theological discourses from the Bible and the church play the following three critical roles in different constituencies: 1) they give hope to many families and households that currently live below the poverty line; 2) they restore integrity to many souls that have lost touch with their inner humanity; 3) they revive meaningfulness in life within communities that would otherwise have lost hope in the new democratic dispensation.

In line with Maimela's argument, Masoga (2017) also describes the church as "kalafong" (a healing shrine).

Gunther Wittenberg: A short Biographical Profile

Valuable information about Wittenberg's life history and academic achievements can be found in the tributes paid to him by Farisani (2014) and West (2014). I can corroborate some of this information, as I had known Wittenberg personally and had

attended one of his classes at the erstwhile University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg campus). Wittenberg was born to missionary parents on 5 April 1935 near Lake Victoria in Tanzania (Farisani 2014, 15–16). He first enrolled for a BA in Pietermaritzburg before moving to Germany to study theology in Bethel, Heidelberg, Tübingen and Kiel. He was ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1963 and died in his home in Pietermaritzburg on 29 March 2014. Farisani (2014, 15–16) describes Wittenberg as “both lecturer and scholar of note—an activist and unifier who should be understood within the context of his commitment to his call and ordination as a pastor.” Wittenberg’s writings displayed “a high intellectual ability ... employed a sociological approach to reading biblical texts. Among others, he addressed issues of poverty, justice, abuse of power, suffering, prophecy and protest ... ecology” (Farisani 2014, 16). Some of Wittenberg’s notable writings covered the following themes:

- “King Solomon and the Theologians” (1988).
- “Authoritarian and Participatory Decision-making in the Old Testament” (1991b).
- “Job the Farmer: The Judean עֵסֶר הַיָּבֵר and the Wisdom Movement” (1991c).
- “Amos and Hosea: A Contribution to the Problem of the ‘Profetenschweigen’ in the Deuteronomistic History (Dtr)” (1993b).
- “Wisdom Influences on Genesis 2–11: A Contribution to the Debate About the ‘Yahwistic’ Primeval History” (1995).
- “Old Testament Theology: For Whom?” (1996).
- “Resistance Theology in the Old Testament: Collected Essays” (2007).

Farisani (2014, 16) remarks that “[i]t is impressive that Wittenberg’s interest in gardening and ecology can be traced back to his earlier writings such as ‘Job the Farmer: the Judean Amharetz and the Wisdom Movement’.” In “I have Heard the Cry of my People: A Study Guide to Exodus 1–15: The Bible in Context No.1” Wittenberg (1991a, 7) commences by examining the family as the basis of the “first party of the conflict” in Israel arguing that:

But in the Book of Exodus the subject of the story is the people of Israel. Exodus 1:1–7 tells how it happened that the people of Israel came to Egypt. The family of Jacob went down to Egypt and there multiplied and became a nation. The storytellers here used the same words found in God’s blessing in Gen 1:28. (Wittenberg 1991a, 7)

Wittenberg’s use of the exodus motif is echoed by Van der Walt (2014, 61), who wrote that “Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and told him: ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert’ (Ex. 5:1).” As noted by Farisani (2014), Wittenberg challenged apartheid policies and supported the Kairos document. He was alienated from many White Lutheran congregations and faced some harassment from the security police. In his tribute to Wittenberg, West (2014) observes as follows:

Recognising that the Bible was a significant text in our South African (and African) context ... sought to harness the considerable resources of academic biblical scholarship

to show how the Bible could be a potential resource for liberation rather than a source of oppression. In taking up this task he combined careful and responsible biblical scholarship with a socially engaged and accountable immersion in context, becoming one of the pioneers of “contextual biblical hermeneutics.” (West 2014, 1)

It is not an over-exaggeration to state that many prominent scholars were taught and mentored by Wittenberg and benefited from his scholarship. The list includes Gerald West, Elelwani Farisani, McGlory Speckman, Bafana Khumalo, Mogomme Masoga, Dumisani Phungula, Malika Sibeko, Gertrud Tonsing, and Solomuzi Mabuza. It is also reported that Wittenberg was the driving force behind a dialogue of faith protest at the former School of Theology at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. Maimela (1987) argues that:

It is above all the story of Israel which proclaims loudly and clearly that the true God is willing and capable of hearing human sighs of pain and can bring human suffering to an end out of his sheer love and mercy. For this reason, the story of Israel will remain forever the source of comfort for those who dare to open the pages of the Bible. (Maimela 1987, 4)

It can be noted that while “contextualising the text” (this approach was criticised elsewhere; see Rugwiji 2020), Wittenberg carefully studied human social capital issues to construct an interesting socio-political and economic landscape of the biblical text. In the illumination piece, “Old Testament Perspectives on Labour,” Wittenberg (2007, 80) argues that “The Old Testament does not have a uniform view on labour” but recounts four different historical phases.

An important area in contextual Bible study scholarship is closing the bridge between the world of the researcher and that of the biblical text (Meyer 2015; Rugwiji 2020). This dichotomy is sensitive, especially in view of the opposition to a literal reading of the Bible by some scholars. The biblical reader has his/her own world and cannot deny its existence while reading and interpreting the biblical text. Wittenberg was not unconscious of the existence of these two worlds. Both Farisani (2014) and West (2014) acknowledge that Wittenberg had the advantage of having studied the two biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) thoroughly and excelled in Hebrew to become an Old Testament professor. He deployed exegetical approaches to arrive at a particular theological idea relevant to his context. Having considered context in his exegesis, Wittenberg understood that biblical hermeneutics requires honesty and integrity, while acknowledging that there are other experts in the same field. In my view (which aligns with Wittenberg’s view), one is expected to be honest about his/her context, while making sure that justice is done to the context of the Bible. As a result, Wittenberg was widely recognised for his approach to hermeneutics, especially considering the fact that he hailed from a supposedly White community.² West (2021, 534) argues that “[g]iven

2 White and Black are used in this article in line with traditional categorisations. They are not used in a negative way and do not validate traditional notions of race, which I do not subscribe to.

his understanding of and commitment to the struggle against racial capitalism, Wittenberg recognised the peculiarity of the class struggle in South Africa.” For this reason, Wittenberg always avoided the situation described by Cone (1977, 12–149) below:

Theologians do not normally reveal the true source of their theological reflections. They often tell us about the books that are similar and not so similar to their perspectives, but seldom do they tell us about the non-intellectual factors that are decisive for the arguments advanced on a particular issue.

As Cone (1977) noted above, balanced theological discourses must be able to bring both worlds together and be able to account for each, as each has its own space from which it speaks. It remains a challenge to find scholars like Wittenberg who are able to tackle this successfully.

Theological-episteme of Hope for South Africa: Voices of Solidarity

In this section, I explore the emergence of other theologians committed to the theology of hope in solidarity with Wittenberg’s empathy for communities devastated by South Africa’s socio-economic problems. These include, but are not limited to Ackermann (2004), Cilliers (2007), Draper (2015), Dreyer (2020), Forster (2015), Masoga and Mathye (2010), Palm (2012), Svenungsson (2019), West (2014), and West (2021).

Draper (2015, 7) who knew and worked closely with Wittenberg, wrote the following:

I acknowledge my debt here to my late colleague Gunther Wittenberg, who patiently explained to me when we began working together in Pietermaritzburg in 1986 why Bultmann had been such an exciting revelation to him as a young student in Germany and what the significance of his hermeneutics was for contextual exegesis.

What does it mean when Wittenberg (1994, 168) argues that, in the Old Testament, “God is depicted as God of the lowly”? In my view, he intended to drive home the idea that the God of the Bible is readily available to deliver the poor and to lift the burden of the oppressed: the suffering of communities in post-apartheid South Africa is no exception. Like the prophetic book of Amos, Wittenberg (1991a) had earlier on taken a swipe against oppression and in support of social justice. Two years later, as if to suggest that his previous work had not covered enough, Wittenberg (1993b, 114) also wrote that “[a] church that wants to follow the prophets cannot stay out of politics, because it must protest against evil, not only in the private lives of individuals, but also in society and the state.” In this regard, Selina Hazel Palm (2012, 27) argues that “[a]n authentic theology of hope offers a framework for the deepest solidarity of the church ‘with the entire human family’ thus enabling a critical analysis of secular approaches without rejecting them outright.” Wittenberg was not only recognised as a prolific writer and activist/theologian in South Africa, but he also wrote about the militancy and political turmoil that prevailed in other African countries. For example, he wrote about the

Hamitic (from the biblical Ham) hypothesis that influenced the genocide in Rwanda (Wittenberg 1991a). It is important to note that the current situation in South Africa requires a different way of doing theology, as Dreyer (2020) argues:

As we have seen with theologians like Luther, Calvin and Barth, and we could have added Augustine and Chrysostom from the early church and South Africans such as Buthelezi, De Gruchy, Boesak, Tutu, Naudé, Geysers and many others, a fundamental responsibility rests on theologians and theology to reflect on and engage with the challenges facing society. (Dreyer 2020, 15)

Given the speed at which the socioeconomic situation is deteriorating in South Africa, the time is ripe for scholars to challenge the status quo. Academic writing (or public speeches, theological conferences, workshops and seminars) concerning and involving impoverished communities is like telling stories to people facing difficult circumstances. According to Ackermann (2004, 41), telling stories “is intrinsic to claiming one’s identity and in this process finding hope ... [and] helps to make sense of an often incomprehensible situation.” This is why staunch Bible readers and perhaps devout Christians testify that being familiar with the Bible and involvement in church activities help them to cope with difficulties and to hope for moments of solace and healing. Indeed, as Dreyer (2020) notes, the Bible “actually has something to say about the human condition and the suffering of people.” In my view, this is the kind of context out of which theology and theological hope emerged. It is in the belief that God is aware of human affliction and that there will be a reversal of adverse situations in the future.

However, the current situation in South Africa is complex and the complexity makes teaching and research in theology a mammoth task. As Masoga and Mathye (2010, 72) opined, during apartheid “it was less complex to name and confront targets whether by applying Contextual or Black Theology reflections or approaches.” In democratic South Africa, the social, political and economic landscapes have assumed new shapes completely; and we ask if the abolishment of the apartheid government has succeeded in reducing the sufferings and struggles of Black South Africans? The answer is “no” because of the following reasons. In addition to problems such as high unemployment and escalating poverty, the HIV/AIDS scourge remains (see Dreyer 2020):

I believe it is the task of the church, and therefore, also of preachers, to supply language that gives form to the primal, human outcry. The significance of this language lies in the fact that it gives voice to the suffering; in it suffering is given dignity of language. But more: with this language we protest against the absurdity of suffering, and, theologically speaking, we confirm that we have all been created in the image of God, and that suffering is not what God willed for His created image. (Dreyer 2020, 158–159)

Dreyer (2020, 3) suggests that the increase in crime “could be the result of prolonged trauma leading to feelings of anger, hopelessness and frustration.” With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, repeated lockdowns have forced companies and industries to close down, leading to massive job losses. As a result, suffering and crime

have surged. Added to this is public corruption.³ Efforts to make the public service more efficient have failed.⁴ Democratic institutions are battered and in some cases are likely to collapse.⁵ Furthermore, racial mistrust persists.⁶ It seems South Africans have lost the ability to debate and disagree civilly without confrontation and are trying to humiliate each other into silence (Masoga and Mathye 2010, 73).

In my opinion, there is a battle: the consequences of broken families, communities and individuals. The abuse of children, women and the aged has reached terrifying levels (Masoga and Mathye 2010). Communities are paralysed by the feeling of anxiety, drift and foreboding of imminent collapse among both Black and White (Masoga and Mathye 2010, 73). There is a demand for fresh ideas and a new direction—which appear to be spectacularly lacking. The global financial crisis has hit the South Africa’s economy and the entire region. The spate of violence and protests by communities across the country against sluggish government delivery of services, indifferent officials and corruption are also likely to continue (Masoga and Mathye 2010, 73). There is the emergence of a new “bling” culture, which has now thoroughly become a part of the new South Africa—meaning one of getting rich quickly, using short-cuts. Unfortunately, the entire state of affairs leads to a society that celebrates mediocrity. Most people are not prepared to work or study hard anymore. In most cases, people are looking for a short-cut (Masoga and Mathye 2010, 73).

Gunther Wittenberg as he Imitated Jesus⁷

How should one theologise in South Africa’s current circumstances? I suggest that a backward-shift to rediscover the theological-episteme of hope is necessary. This biblical and theological discourse has to take extensive institutional, moral and leadership issues into account. To imitate Wittenberg, I propose the following: integrity and sincerity

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- 3 Some of the cases include the Nkandla presidential infrastructure development and maintenance project, which has been the subject of intense national debate. The Public Protector reported that former President Zuma improperly benefited from the project and ruled that he should repay some of the costs to the government. Also, there have been a number of reports about certificate forgery among senior government officials, which portray the state as incompetent and corrupt (refer to *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State Report: Part I & II Vol. 1 & 2, 2022: Denel*).
 - 4 Reports suggest that only a few municipalities perform creditably. There are also issues of municipal boundary demarcation, as indicated by protests in Malamulele in Limpopo province (refer to *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State Report: Part I & II Vol. 1 & 2, 2022: Denel*).
 - 5 Several public institutions have come under the spotlight. An example is the allegation that the chairperson of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) possessed a forged qualification. Also, reports question the appointment of the SABC’s Chief Operating Officer, Mr H Motsoeneng and the Chief Operating Officer for the South African Airways, whose qualifications have been questioned (refer to *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State Report: Part I & II Vol. 1 & 2, 2022: Denel*).
 - 6 Reports in print media about racism and racialism in South Africa are alarming.
 - 7 This phrase is borrowed from Jonathan A. Draper (2009).

among well-trained theologians with sound homiletics and hermeneutical orientations, who will potentially transform society on the basis of the Word of God. There is a need for a shift of approach. Wittenberg, as demonstrated in this inquiry, has played his part, but the struggle continues (Tooley 2004). The task of doing and teaching theology should include other disciplines and voices within and outside the social sciences (Masoga and Mathye 2010, 74). For sanity to prevail in our society, the struggle should be a collective effort involving both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of research in the theological process. While this is not a dogmatic call for theologians to be competent in all disciplines, it “strongly reasons for a balanced approach in drawing theological voices” (Masoga and Mathye 2010, 74).

I propose that theological colleges and faculties of theology and biblical studies at universities be revived and encouraged to reclaim their prophetic voices. Voices like that of Wittenberg are scarce among theologians in post-apartheid South Africa. Currently, the ecclesiastical voice seems to be silenced by new and dominant ways of politics and social relations. Most academics and theologians seem to be unwilling or unprepared to venture into politics or business. Theologians and researchers often hail the historic roles of struggle giants such as Desmond Tutu, Itumeleng Mosala, Simon Maimela, and Wittenberg. These theologians appear to present themselves as being “too smart” to participate actively in governance and politics. In my view, two things are at stake here—generic phobia and self-centredness—and these must be overcome if changes are to be realised.

The crises affecting society in general have a negative impact on the church, which now seems to be lacking in honesty and is not sufficiently involved in the community. The church has retreated from theologisation and is, therefore, failing to fulfil its calling. This, in my view, echoes Heschel’s (2003, 378) reference to “a hiding God.” Theologians are supposed to be God’s torchbearers in society. They must, at all costs, desist from abetting crime and the impoverishment of people in order to promote hope in God’s salvation in society.

Theologians must abstain from soliciting unmerited favours, especially given the current high unemployment and inflation in the country. The theology of hope can play an important role in technological advancement with regard to the maintenance of infrastructure. With Christians and pastors in the ranks of senior government parastatals, the church and theologians can exert influence by voicing concern on problems.

Lastly, theologians of hope must be prepared to put their heads on the block (see Mazhar 2017, 250). In fact, that is the nature of their divine calling. Being a theologian, a historian and an academic is a risky endeavour. Indeed, there are some South African institutions of higher learning where the threat to life is a reality, as Draper has observed:

The security forces attempted to monitor and suppress such academic discourse by enrolling members of the security police to attend classes as theology students and to pass on sensitive information about participants, to the extent that, in some academic

settings, it became necessary for informers to be excluded from graduate seminars for the protection of progressive graduate students, such as Frank Chikane, Director of the Institute for Contextual Theology. (Draper 2009, 1)

Conclusion

This essay has explored Gunther Wittenberg's scholarship on the theology of hope. It was established that Wittenberg articulated his "theology of hope" from two fronts: his position as a trained Lutheran pastor familiar with the biblical text on the concept of hope, and as an individual versed in Lutheran philosophy and acquainted with Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope. In any theological college, training would not be complete without a study of Jürgen Moltmann's theology. Wittenberg's early years of ministry and professorship could have motivated him to examine the theology of hope more broadly, both in the apartheid era and in democratic South Africa. I have noted that Farisani (2014) and West (2014; 2021), among others, have provided valuable understandings of Wittenberg's life and academic achievements.

I have raised serious questions about the challenges facing the task of doing biblical theology in South Africa today. I have challenged modern theologians, particularly among Black Africans, to emulate Wittenberg in theologisation today. Wittenberg spoke vehemently against apartheid, which was supported by the majority of his fellow White community. They did not like him for that. I also pointed out the need for both the church and African theologians to challenge the evils perpetuated by the South African government, which consists predominantly of Black people. Theological institutions, researchers and teachers of theology should go back to the drawing board and take stock of the unfinished business of the theology of hope.

I have argued that the fear of the unknown pervades critical theologisation among local and Black theologians. I have noted, also, that being a theologian and an academic is a calling that requires sacrifice, as the problems confronting post-apartheid South Africans are daunting. As Draper has noted, fulfilling this call can be a risky endeavour. Wittenberg and other theologians played their part and the rest remains for young and upcoming theologians to pick up the baton and continue the race.

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