Contextual Theology during the Apartheid Period in South Africa: The Case of the University of Venda

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Abstract

This article provides a brief report and reflection on the historical development of contextual theology at the University of Venda (Univen). Contextual theology offered academic institutions, even in Bantustans such as Venda, a theologically significant expression. It is noteworthy that the subject of “contextual theology” as a paradigm, in this regard, is dissimilar to traditional Western classical theology by substance and orientation. This study focuses on the historical development of contextual theology and the contribution made by Univen between its inception in the early 1980s and the end of apartheid in the early 1990s. There is a need to critically explore the unique experience and development of contextual theology during apartheid. The relevance of this study is predicated on the complexities of articulating contextual engagement in distinct settings and the issues that shape them. This further involves locating contextual voices, priorities, and how they contribute to theological discourse. It includes uncovering lessons available for current and future developments of contextual theology. The oral history methodology is adopted to buttress reflection and analysis in this qualitative research endeavour. Oral interviews are transcribed and interpreted to bring to light the historical development of contextual theology at a former Bantustan university.

Keywords: contextual theology; apartheid; Bantustan; former Venda Bantustan; homeland; University of Venda

Introduction

The University of Venda (Univen) is located within the Thulamela municipal Vhembe region in Limpopo. Univen was established in 1982 through the University of Venda Act to cater to the educational needs of Black South Africans staying in a Bantustan in the former Northern Transvaal (Rootman 2012). Its existence was directed at the rural
inhabitants of the former Republic of Venda. However, it comprised not only Venda-speaking people but students from other parts of the country. By the time apartheid was abolished, Univen had students from all over the country.

Rootman (2012) further indicates that Univen was originally a branch of the University of the North. During this time, university education was barred (for some) as stipulated in the South African Black States Constitution Act of 1971 (Act No. 21 of 1971). Interestingly, no funds were provided by the government for the erection of buildings or the purchase of equipment essential to the smooth operation of an institution of higher learning. Finally, in 1982, Univen, after its founding, opened its doors on the grounds of the Dimani Agricultural High School, which was located within the Tshivhase territory (Rootman 2012). The government of South Africa launched its reform of tertiary education in the new millennium; through this initiative, the university could offer theoretically and practically oriented courses (Dube et al. 2017).

Theoretical Framing

Theology is situated within particular experiences of faith communities and individuals, and contextualising theology implies doing theology in discourse with diverse contextual realities (Prosén 2003). The latter entails biblical traditions and varying contexts as experienced by Christians or theologians. Contextual theology focuses on presenting biblical texts and practice as good sources of theological expression, combined with cultural considerations, history, and contemporary thought models (Compellingtruth 2022).

Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vähäkangas (2021) state that:

> Contextual theology’s own context of emergence is characterised by ecumenical, trans-confessional and translocal social and cultural processes, and in comparison with earlier approaches such as liberation theology and political theology—of course likewise contextually aware—explicit contextual theology is not only nurtured by an intense exchange with theories from philosophy and social sciences but includes a constructive and self-critical awareness of theories of culture. (Bergmann and Vähäkangas 2021, 2)

In his definition of contextual theology, Bevans (1992) states the following: “... a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the church; the culture in which one is theologising; and social change within that culture; the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice, and liberation” (Adeleke 2020, 2).

The Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in South Africa defines contextual theology as “doing theology in the context of real-life experiences” (Rodriguez 2012). The period from 1976 to 1981, which spans from the era of the Soweto uprisings, ushered in the arrival of contextual theology in South Africa. Subsequently, apartheid compelled the revaluation of theological approaches and understanding of the time. In this sense,
Contextual theology signified a critical interpretation of Scripture that was contextually suited for the African setting or, more explicitly, theological perspectives shaped by the African reality for the African situation. Contextual theology provided the theological reasoning and prophetic mandate required to confront apartheid (Rodriguez 2012). In South Africa, contextual theology may be similar to liberation theology.

If one wishes to understand how Blacks were impacted by apartheid at Bantustan universities, one must examine the context within which Blacks were shaped. According to Wills (2011), regarding education for Black people in South Africa during apartheid, during his tenure as minister of education, Hendrik Verwoerd said:

… education must train and teach in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live; education should have roots entirely in the Native areas and the Native environment and Native community in all aspects. There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. (Wills 2011, 2).

Contextual Background: Venda Bantustan

With the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act, South Africa introduced the concept of Bantustans; these were, in essence, ethnically demarcated areas known as “homelands,” which the apartheid government created to control and manage people (Lissoni and Ally 2018). Those territories were supposed to be spaces where Africans could implement their governance. It was structured according to alleged similarities in religious, cultural, and linguistic conceptions. On the other hand, education was funded and staffed separately in each town but controlled by Pretoria.

Bantustans were economically and politically reliant on the Republic of South Africa, helping as resource pools for those separated and relocated to South Africa, including centres for redirecting the aspirations of Black people towards politics and education (Chisholm 2018). Neither the social nor educational historians of South Africa have focused on specific Bantustans so much as they have examined these as part of South Africa’s segregationist and apartheid strategy. Moreover, Chisholm (2018) opines that Bantustans “were connected through the narrow, vocationalised school curriculum that they followed, the educational ‘expert’ networks that crossed their borders, and the reformist thrust that emerged within the South African state after the student revolt of 1976” (Chisholm 2018, 32).

Before 1959, Afrikaans-medium universities were historically closed to African students. Although this was the norm, certain English and Afrikaans universities had always welcomed students of all races (The Ratcatcher 2012). Although the University of Natal had diverse student bodies, it still had a race-based classification system, whereas Fort Hare was almost entirely made up of Black students.
The party in power, the National Party, moved to advance the apartheid agenda by spreading its principles into higher education through the Extension of University Education Act No. 45 of 1959 (Smith 2014). According to this law, students of colour were required to obtain permits from relevant ministers to study at formerly open universities. It was deemed necessary to set up separate universities for Africans, Indians, Coloured, and other ethnic groups. While the Act did not ban Black students from attending White universities, it did restrict their attendance in some instances (*The Ratcatcher* 2012).

Apartheid policies were instrumental in disrupting Black lives in South Africa; the Bantu Authorities Act of 1959 was an excellent example of this and how governance was influenced in the administration of the homeland. Homelands were designated according to ethnicity, as with the Vhavenda and the Republic of South Africa (*The Ratcatcher* 2012). Independent chiefdoms were not only subjected to colonial rule and the deep penetration of missionary enterprises, but also to apartheid and its machinery. These different factors ultimately impacted higher education institutions in South Africa.

Resane (2018) explains that universities in South Africa were classified into five categories. Moreover, these categories included the following higher education institutions: the University of Cape Town, the University of Rhodes, and the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), among others; which were classified as either English or White. Universities like Stellenbosch, Pretoria, and Orange Free State were just some of those who were considered Afrikaans. One finds that the Black universities were classified according to ethnicity. This may be seen, for instance, with universities such as Turfloop (reserved for Pedi-speaking people) and Univen (for Luvenda and Shangaan-speaking students). Like the other Bantustan universities, Fort Hare was meant for Xhosa-speaking people, and the University of Zululand was for Zulu-speaking people (Resane 2018).

The above universities were open to ethnic students looking for study fields unavailable in institutions created explicitly for them. Wits was one of the medical institutions that offered medicine training to Black students since their ethnic institutions did not (Digby 2013). The University of Bophuthatswana, the University of Venda, and the University of Transkei are a few examples of homeland universities that emerged because of semi- or nominal independence from their homelands.

By the 1980s, students of African descent were enrolled not only in Black universities but also in those reserved for White people. However, the numbers were low (Council on Higher Education 2004). Permit restrictions were removed with the Universities Amendment Bill. The Act enabled quotas to be imposed by the minister to limit Black university students at White universities. However, despite making it law, this clause was never implemented as it faced massive opposition from English-language
universities. Consequently, the 1983 Bill allowed English language universities to admit students from all racial groups to their programmes.

Apartheid Ideology, System, and the Theological Paradigm of Afrikaner History

With the advent of nationalism towards the end of colonialism, there was an increasing consciousness of the irrelevance and even oppressive implications of theology that claimed universal validity (Gunn 2018). Affirming apartheid (Gunn 2018) was the ideology that the National Party (NP) applied with devastating effect during the general election of May 1948. An Afrikaner-based and Calvinist-based form of segregation was based on a dehumanising, profoundly rooted system of racial discrimination (Lephakga 2012).

Through a prejudiced interpretation of the Old Testament and Calvin’s doctrines, apartheid was established, and racism, segregation, and the establishment of Bantustans (homelands) became manifestations (Farisani 2014). Through the influence of apartheid, Black people were exploited, humiliated, and oppressed. Consequently, Black people lived in segregationist environments and internalised the inequities between races.

The Development of Contextual Theology at the University of Venda during Apartheid

The Research Process

Data Collection Method and Procedure

The study that directed this article employed a qualitative research methodology whereby the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, and data typically collected in the participant’s setting (Creswell 2009, 22). Interviews were conducted using an interview schedule, and were conducted according to the procedures of oral history where the focus was not on the interviewer but instead on the interviewee, who does most of the talking with occasional questions from the interviewer to guide the directions as thought to be most productive. Due to the restrictions of Covid-19, some interviews were conducted virtually through Microsoft Teams, and others telephonically, where both were recorded and notes were taken. The intended participants for the study were 11, but due to unavailability and the restrictions of Covid-19, only six participants were interviewed. Amongst them, three were lecturers, and three were students.

The content of the interview schedule was divided into three sections:

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The first section was based on the role the individual played and their personal details. The second section concentrated on what contextual theology is about, how it began at the Univen, its content, and its challenges and benefits during the period of apartheid. The third section concluded by posing questions on its relevancy and importance, its audience, and whether it is still relevant today.

**Ethical Information**

Research approval was requested per the University of Venda Research Ethics policy by completing the application and adhering to their process. Permission or consent was solicited from each research participant by asking them to complete a copy of the consent form approved by Univen. The research participants’ real names were not used; instead, pseudo names were preferred.

**First Interview**

The first interview was conducted with Tebogo (pseudo name). Tebogo is a former HOD and founder of contextual theology at Univen. He was appointed as a professor of biblical studies at the end of 1989. The requirements of the post needed a person with a qualification in contextual theology. After the interviews, he was found to be suitable for the post. When he began his career, he continued with biblical studies as it was offered at the institution. Biblical studies at the time catered for students who were mainly within the teaching stream, as the module was still part of the school subjects and subsequently had many students. As a mandate, Tebogo was not to promote biblical studies but to focus on contextual theology and religion, and in 1990 he began to work on the curriculum. He further discussed the curriculum with existing staff at the institution teaching biblical studies.

A conference was convened at Giyani to finalise the details of the curriculum. At the end of the workshop, an agreement was reached regarding what was needed in the curriculum and what the department’s name would be. At the end of 1991, it served through different committees, faculty, and then the senate; until it was approved by the end of 1991. At the beginning of 1992, the Contextual Theology and Religion Department started. The idea was to have programmes for the undergraduate degree, which was a bachelor’s degree in theology, progressing until a master’s degree. Unfortunately, in September 1992, Tebogo was appointed as the vice-chancellor of the University of Venda, which meant that he had to leave the department and all the ideas of contextual theology.

Tebogo further stated that, since theology worldwide and in South Africa was more academic, the praxis model was not sufficiently addressed, which was reflected in ministry towards society. In 1999, the department progressed and submitted an amended vision to the senate. During that time, there was much talk about having a new principal. During the meeting, a professor from the SADC countries said that the contextual theology department wanted to create an empire for themselves, which poisoned the
people and interred with their vision. The proposal was rejected, the spirit of protest against contextual theology grew, and in the end, the Department of Contextual Theology and Religion was phased out. That was the end of contextual theology, and it saddened Tebogo. To indicate his passion and hope for contextual theology, this is how he put it:

After I retired as the bishop of our church, I tried to have it resuscitated whereby discussions were held, but it did not work very well. I am happy that theology is now back at the University of Venda, and I hope the spirit of contextual theology will come back.

Tebogo defines contextual theology as a theology that denotes a method or a model of thinking in general theology; it is a particular starting point representing a mode of theological reflection. When he explained further:

The academic theology says we start with the Bible, then move with it, and whatever the Bible says, whatever the Bible tells us, we analyse, interpret, and impose that on the community. Contextual theology is a two-legged animal, one leg in the Bible and one in society. It is like two movements, one moving from society back to the Bible. The Bible moves from where it is forward, and somewhere in the middle, they meet.

To shed more light on what he understood contextual theology to be about, he further stated that one needs to understand the context in which one finds himself or herself in order to come to an understanding of the Bible. In addition, he explained that the Bible is a product of a dialogue between God and people. God communicated with prophets and apostles who understood what God was saying in their contexts, so the Bible interprets what was communicated to the prophets and the apostles.

Relevancy of Contextual Theology to the Community

According to Tebogo, contextual theology was very relevant soon after the emergence of the department; many churches were sending their members to become students. That was an indication that churches were interested in contextual theology. Examples are Rev. Ramulondi and Rev. Nemaukhwe, who are very influential in their context. Those who had begun with a bachelor’s degree included students like Rev. Ramulondi and Rev. Nemaukhwe. The first intake for the master’s degree comprised Rev. Ndou and Rev. Nedohe, supervised by Tebogo. Rev. Mudimeli and Rev. Mutshekwane also became students at the master’s level. It was clear that theology attracted many churches, including the independent churches whose point of departure was African culture; though contextual theology is not only about culture but also includes politics and socio-economic issues—it is about life.

Second Interview

The second interview was conducted with Peter (pseudo name), one of the lecturers of biblical studies and contextual theology at the Univen. He is retired and serves as a
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Reformed South African church pastor. He began his career as a lecturer in January 1983, only two years after the establishment of the university. He found that biblical studies at the university began in 1981, and he became the first full-time lecturer teaching both second and third-year students. He lectured on both Old Testament and New Testament.

The first-year students were about 280, most of whom were teachers, as biblical studies was one of the school subjects. It was later in his career that some of his students were also appointed as lecturers. He stated that contextual theology was started by Tebogo, who looked at it from an African context of poverty and apartheid. In the African context, he was referring to reading the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed, and that it was somehow linked to liberation theology. Most of the Black churches were interested in liberation theology. He stated that, after 1994, liberation theology lost its prominence, which also affected the number of admissions into the study of contextual theology.

Third Interview

The third interview was conducted with Phumudzo, a contextual theology student. He is now serving as a pastor of the Lutheran Church, the leader of pastors of the Vhembe Pastor’s Forum, and chairperson of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) within the district. Phumudzo was a master’s degree student from 1996 to 1997. He decided to follow his calling to be a pastor. After he attended the Lutheran seminary at Marang, he felt there was still a need to continue studying. He studied contextual theology at Univen to further his knowledge. He thought Univen had formal postgraduate degree studies in which he had an interest. The other reason that made him study contextual theology at Univen, apart from theology being offered by different institutions, was because Univen was close to his home, and he knew Univen would give him what he wanted. As a delegate of the SACC, he had attended a University in Geneva where he was doing theology for life, which according to him, was not different from contextual theology. According to Phumudzo, contextual theology is a theology that responds to what people face when they are in different situations.

The students at Univen, at the time, knew them as they were pastoring churches and were coming from different churches. The class size was minimal, and students were very few. Sometimes students would be three or four in the lecturer’s office. Only if a student was doing other modules would they be able to meet more students. It is possible that the low numbers of students who had enrolled were because of a lack of proper programme marketing. The lecturers who were there were both White and Black. In highlighting his experience, Phumudzo mentioned that the White lecturers were not interested in discussing apartheid, but the Black lecturers were eager to discuss it.

The content of contextual theology was very practical; it would help one to face challenges. Around 1985, the Kairos documents posed a response to what the apartheid government was doing and told the church what to do. During that time, there was what
was formerly called the Republic of Venda in South Africa. Contextual theology dealt with issues that were problematic to people daily; it allowed people to address problematic issues they were facing. Phumudzo explained that contextual theology assisted him with information from conferences and discussions with others and helped him align what he studied or read to what was happening.

Relevancy of Contextual Theology to the Community

Phumudzo shared that contextual theology is still relevant today, but there is still much to be done. There is a need to understand the period we are in and to understand what God is saying. The church today is discriminated against, and if the church does not rise, the next generation will suffer. The church has much to do today, especially when facing today’s challenges. Churches and the university should convene and consider the challenges of today and address them. He argues that the church is not relevant in what is happening today; for example, if pastors, in their preaching, praise what the government is doing, then they are encouraging the government instead of showing direction to the leadership of the government. If the church could share the mind of God, it could help shape things in the government and lead them in the right direction instead of the church listening to what the government is saying.

Phumudzo expressed that there was a severe lack of material that one would be able to use from South African writers; sometimes, one read material from America that was not relevant. He further relayed a severe lack of contextual theology literature as some books were burned during the apartheid government. In revealing the state of affairs of the time, he said: “I was also chased from Thohoyandou by the police.”

Fourth Interview

Phophi was one of the students who graduated with a Bachelor of Theology degree in 1996, which was a four-year degree. She is now a teacher by profession in one of the local schools. She attributed the failure of students to the White lecturers in theology, who were not at ease when students discussed issues of apartheid. Sometimes students would write assignments and cite real examples of apartheid, and lecturers would fail them. When most students became aware that they were sharing the same problems (whereby lecturers were failing them), she said they decided to protest and chase White lecturers out of the university. In the classes, they had Black lecturers where contextual theology was well explained with illustrations for students to understand. According to her, no relevant interpretation was provided by White lecturers to suit the context of a Black person. Phophi felt contextual theology was irrelevant to the community it served.

Fifth Interview

The fifth interview was conducted with Mulalo, a Bachelor of Theology student. Mulalo is now a reverend who is pastoring a church in the local community. He defines contextual theology as a theology that works in the context, considers the people’s experiences and challenges, and tries to address them. Mulalo shared his experiences
while he was in the class that theology was a challenging course for the students because most of them failed, and some decided to move to another university while others dropped out of their studies. According to Mulalo, contextual theology is still needed today and will never be irrelevant to the communities, as it must deal with the people’s daily lives.

**Sixth Interview**

Moses, a former contextual theology lecturer at Univen, was the sixth interviewee. Besides being a reverend, Moses is also a teacher and has been active in community organisations. He articulated that contextual theology is a theological response to the dynamics of a particular context. Such a response proceeds to dialogue with social-cultural values, change, and new cultural identities. He not only expressed the dangers of delving into the then-sensitive topic of liberation during apartheid, but depicted how the racial divide between lecturers was challenging. Black lecturers were attuned to and more willing to engage the social challenges facing Africans in South Africa at the time.

He further indicated how students (mostly from mainline churches) were very interested in contextual theology as it created a platform where their minds were opened. It provided a means to deal with the South African context biblically. Moses emphasised that contextual theology was particularly relevant according to him due to its contribution to the interpretation of the Scriptures, which enriched biblical understanding. To this, he added that contextual theology is still relevant today.

**Themes**

The participants shared crucial information, and their voices and thoughts were the focus, not those of the interviewer. In this method of research, the interviewee does most of the talking with occasional questions from the interviewer to give direction, which was deemed the most productive. From the information shared by participants, the following themes emerged:

1. Contextual theology at Univen has impacted the lives of men and women in the community. Its relevancy is unquestionable, and it has support from the local churches.
2. Contextual theology is not just an academic exercise; its main focus is on praxis. It has one leg in the Bible and the other in society. One’s context determines the type of interpretation that one will adopt.
3. The content of contextual theology can always be relevant and aligned to the times and the society it serves.
4. The core values of contextual theology can provide a relevant response to and the stance that the church can take in responding to today’s challenges between government and society.
5. Contextual theology at Univen has provided relevant approaches to confront apartheid as it was based on the Bible and shaped by the context.
Conclusion

This article discussed contextual theology discourses and concentrated on the role of contextual theology at Univen during apartheid. The focus was on the historical development of contextual theology and the contribution made by Univen between its inception in the early 1980s and the end of apartheid in the early 90s. Contextual theology critically engages with the communities it is serving. It does so through participating in the daily lives and experiences of the people. It is still relevant today to the communities and can provide relevant approaches to people’s dilemmas. Contextual theology maintains a duty to confront oppression and prevent those under oppression from becoming oppressors.

References


