

Editorial

# Introduction to “Transforming Encounters and Critical Reflection: African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology in Dialogue”

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**Abstract:** This special issue of *Religions*, entitled “Transforming Encounters and Critical Reflection: African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology in Dialogue”, brought together diverse international scholars and experts to think together on the intersection of African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology. One of the aims of this special issue, and of the preceding conference (as stated in the call for papers), was to explore the complex relationship between the West’s pervasive (capitalistic) culture and epistemologies, and the current post-colonial context of (southern) Africa. As such, it provided a platform to engage questions regarding the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and culture through both a philosophical and theological lens. The final publication of all articles in the special issue not only achieved the above set aims, but accomplished even more by opening up new creative pathways of thinking about the three traditions that were brought into conversation (and not only within their intersection).

**Keywords:** transforming encounters; Critical Theory; Liberation Theology; African Philosophy

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This special issue of *Religions*, entitled “Transforming Encounters and Critical Reflection: African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology in Dialogue”, brought together diverse international scholars and experts to think together on the intersection of African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology. One of the aims of this special issue, and of the preceding conference (as stated in the call for papers), was to explore the complex relationship between the West’s pervasive (capitalistic) culture and epistemologies, and the current post-colonial context of (southern) Africa. As such, it provided a platform to engage questions regarding the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and culture through both a philosophical and theological lens.

The final publication of all articles in the special issue not only achieved the above set aims, but accomplished even more by opening up new creative pathways of thinking about the three traditions that were brought into conversation (and not only within their intersection).

In total, eleven articles were published, and they were well representative of all three traditions. They can be loosely grouped together as described below, although some articles pertinently explore the intersection of the traditions (e.g., Lamola, Resane, Sands, and Verhoef) while others focus on the dialogue between some of these traditions (e.g., Resane and Gerber). The grouping here is, thus, mainly pragmatic in nature in order to assist with further discussion of the themes.

**Part 1: African Thought.** This part includes themes like decolonization, Traditional African Religion, African Philosophy, African rationality, and questions about African epistemologies. There is an overlap and dialogue within this group on various points with Liberation Theology and Critical Theory, as will become clear in all the authors’ work.

Kelebogile T. Resane, “Transparent Theological Dialogue—“*Moseka Phofu Ya Gaabo Ga a Tshabe Go Swa Lentswe*” (A Setswana Proverb). Resane’s article focuses on “transparent theological dialogue” and his starting point is the Setswana proverb, “one must fight impatiently for what rightly belongs to him or her” (Resane 2018). He argues from a traditional African proverb and notion of dialogue back to its applicability to theological discourse, but with the aim of explicitly critiquing corruption in the socio-political context. All three themes—African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology—thus come together in this elucidating article on transparent dialogue. The African proverb is helpful here because it asks for an impatient “fighting” for the marginalized and poor, and Resane links this to the church’s calling to liberate the oppressed masses. Such a transparent dialogue between the traditions can, as he argues, help communities to experience liberation on different levels.

Joel Mokhoathi, “From Contextual Theology to African Christianity: The Consideration of *Adiaphora* from a South African Perspective”. In the same spirit of Resane’s “transparent dialogue” between African traditions and theology, Mokhoathi argues that proponents of contextual Christianity might have overlooked some critical aspects of African cultural and religious heritage. There is much more to learn from Traditional African Religion than what is often acknowledged by Christian theologians. Mokhoathi lists two examples, namely the pragmatic nature of the African cultural and religious heritage, and the African traditional methods of healing. These things must not “fall in between” (*adiaphora*) (Mokhoathi 2017) within a dialogue, but rather be brought to the fore to explore and value its richness for the community as a whole.

Lawrence O. Ugwuanyi, “Towards a Rational Kingdom in Africa: Knowledge, Critical Rationality and Development in a Twenty-First Century African Cultural Context”. Ugwuanyi’s article broadens the discussion of African Thought by explicitly engaging with the colonial and post-colonial challenges it faces. He critiques the assumptions on which modern states were built in post-colonial Africa as “an outcome of a wrong knowledge design” (Ugwuanyi 2018). He proposes in its place a more African “knowledge design” in which the term “rational kingdom” functions as a pointer to the “community of reason marked by critical conceptual self-awareness driven by innovation and constructivism”. Ugwuanyi’s aim here is to find more authentic African sources to address African problems in a decolonized context.

Schalk H. Gerber, “From Dis-Enclosure to Decolonisation: In Dialogue with Nancy and Mbembe on Self-Determination and the Other”. The theme of African Thought and decolonization is taken further in Gerber’s article. He specifically asks what comes after the logic of the colonizer. This question is pertinent in a world dominated by the “all-enclosing Western worldview” (Gerber 2018), which leads to various political, economic, social, and intellectual oppression. Gerber argues that both the Continental philosophy of religion and African philosophy address this question, and he then proceeds to look at Jean-Luc Nancy and Achille Mbembe’s thoughts in this regard. In dialogue with these two thinkers, he sees decolonization as the “dis-enclosure of the world”, which opens up a space for an alternative ontology that acknowledges our existence as always being-in-the-word with others. Dis-enclosure, as an alternative ontology of decolonization, implies for Gerber the responsibility for the “reparation of the dignity of the whole of humanity within our shared world”.

**Part 2: Critical Theory.** Gerber’s incorporation of Jean-Luc Nancy’s alternative ontology in his concept of decolonization serves in a way as a bridge to the themes addressed by the papers in the Critical Theory tradition. Specific themes that are prominent in this section are freedom, determinism, embodiment, facticity, existentialism, authenticity, and transcendence. Authors such as Sartre, Agamben, Merleau-Ponty, Adam Smith, and Žižek are discussed.

Abraham Olivier, “The Freedom of Facticity”. Olivier’s article about the “freedom of facticity” asks in a very definite way: “How free are we from the facticity of situations, particularly ones in which we are subject to collective identification?” This links immediately to the above themes discussed under African Thought, such as decolonization, African rationality, racism, and freedom. Olivier elaborates on his initial question by adding more questions: “How free are we to change the situations—places, environments, histories, others—to which we inevitably belong and which subject us to collective

identities? How free are we from identification in terms of others? How free are we to transform such identification?" (Olivier 2018). The relevance of these questions lies for Olivier in the harmful effects of collective ascriptions, and in the pressing demands to change it. Olivier argues that it is not through freedom that one has a situation with limited options (Sartre), but that it is "on the basis of a situation and the limits of its options that we are set free to have choices". Our situations enable us to have options of choice (a heteronomous freedom), and therefore, individuals cannot be sufficiently free if "oppressive situations that legitimize collective labeling, such as racism, are still allowed to exist". It is on this point where Olivier's work has the potential to productively engage with African Thought and Liberation Theology, but also with other traditions like existentialism.

Marcos A. Norris, "Existential Choice as Repressed Theism: Jean-Paul Sartre and Giorgio Agamben in Conversation". The discussion of Sartre and freedom continues in the next article, written by Norris. He brings Sartre's notion of existential authenticity (sovereign decisionism) into conversation with the work of Giorgio Agamben. Norris indicates in his article how Sartre's sovereign decisionism parallels "how modern democratic governments conduct themselves during a state of emergency" (Norris 2018), and secondly, how Sartre's existential authenticity models secularized theism. The implication of this is for Norris that "an existential belief in sovereign decision represses, rather than profanes, the divine origins of authoritarian law". A link between existentialism and theism is hereby emphasized by Norris, which accentuates the importance of the dialogue between (amongst others) Critical Theory and Liberation Theology.

Mark Rathbone, "Adam Smith, the Impartial Spectator and Embodiment: Towards an Economics of Accountability and Dialogue". Rathbone's article brings the economic reality of our lives and freedom into play. Rathbone argues that Adam Smith's economics are far more complex than mere self-interest as a driver of commerce. There is not a clear causality to be found here, and the relationship is much less deterministic than often perceived. To move away from the deterministic jargon often used to describe an individual's behavior, Rathbone explores the embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, which can offer "a theory of behavior that goes beyond a particular society's perceptions of acceptable behavior" (Rathbone 2018). Rathbone concludes that it is in the "hyper-dialectic of the flesh" where one can find accountability and dialogue in moral assessment. This is needed to create a more "responsible" economy from which not only the rich will benefit.

Anné H. Verhoef, "Encountering Transcendence: Žižek, Liberation Theology and African Thought in Dialogue". In a vein of dialogue between the three traditions discussed in this special issue, Verhoef explores the notion of transcendence as an entry point to this dialogue. His specific focus is on how transcendence is encountered by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a post-metaphysical thinker. Verhoef argues that Žižek's notion of the "gap in immanence" has some crucial implications for a notion of freedom. Verhoef then asks if African thought—specifically Traditional African Religion—and Liberation Theology allow for such a "gap in immanence" or for a kind of transcendence (Verhoef 2017). He argues that a lack of such a notion might be detrimental for freedom (ironically in "Liberation" Theology, and in African Thought as "decolonization") and a return to a deterministic understanding of being, life, and ethics.

**Part 3: Liberation Theology.** Verhoef's article ends with a discussion of freedom and Liberation Theology. This is only one of the themes that connect Critical Theory to Liberation Theology and African Thought. In this section on Liberation Theology, themes such as incarnation, Kairos, religious epistemology, praxis, political theology, and interdisciplinary methodology receive prominence. Authors that are centrally referred to in this section include Karl Marx, Joseph Cardinal Cardijn, Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Bof, Mikhail Bakhtin, Albert Nolan, Paul Tillich, and Louis Althusser.

Malesela J. Lamola, "Marx, the Praxis of Liberation Theology, and the Bane of Religious Epistemology". Lamola asks in his article whether religious epistemology can aid in the transformation of the world to the same effect as Marxist Theory. In answering this question, he problematizes the transcendentalism that Liberation Theology places on social practice. He argues that the theology of revolution is a type of Hegelian theosophy which, in effect, loses its socio-materialist basis (of Marx),

and eventually, praxis. He concludes that Liberation Theology has limited efficacy for socio-political transformation because of its inherent transcendentalist and rationalistic orientation (Lamola 2018). Sands's article, however, gives an interesting alternative view on the praxis aspect of Liberation Theology (and the other traditions).

Ian Bekker, "Kairos and Carnival: Mikhail Bakhtin's Rhetorical and Ethical Christian Vision". A more positive outlook on the praxis of Liberation Theology is found in the article by Bekker. He focuses on the term "Kairos", which for modern liberation theologians at least, refers to the breakthrough of the divine into human history. Kairos is important because it implies a consciousness of the present, as well as the need for responsive action. Bekker explores the potential of this concept by linking it to Bakhtin's work and his emphasis on carnival, or the flesh (Bekker 2018). The importance of the corporal and praxis of Liberation Theology (in contrast to Lamola's view) is highlighted by Bekker when he makes the connections explicit between Bakhtin's carnivalesque vision and a Christian reading of the ethical importance of Kairos (with its links to incarnation).

Justin Sands, "Introducing Cardinal Cardijn's See-Judge-Act as an Interdisciplinary Method to Move Theory into Practice". Sands continues this emphasis on the praxis of Liberation Theology, but his discussion also attempts to incorporate African Thought and Critical Theory at the same time (Sands 2018a). His question is how one can translate theories (created by dialogue on colonialism and capitalism, for example) into practice. The following question is how to enact on these theories as one collective group. Sands finds recourse in the method of Joseph Cardinal Cardijn's See-Judge-Act. He proposes this interdisciplinary method as a framework to move from theory to praxis, which will not cede away the core principles of each discipline. Sands first discusses Cardijn's articulation of the method, and then, explores how two liberation theologians (Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff) employed this method in their theological framework. Sands concludes with an exploration of how this method might be beneficial for other traditions such as African Thought and Critical Theory. The ethical praxis—which is often questioned in this special issue—is thereby creatively addressed by Sands.

### In Summary

To bring such diverse traditions like African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology in dialogue initially seemed like an unlikely (or even impossible) task. With this special issue, and the preceding conference, it became clear, however, that such a dialogue is indeed possible and also very fertile. It is fertile especially in terms of the reconceptualization of key concepts which link these traditions—like freedom, justice, dialogue, praxis, ideology critique—but also in terms of the reconceptualization of these terms within each tradition. In that sense, the first part of the title of the special issue, namely "Transforming Encounters and Critical Reflection", indeed became the intellectual experience of dealing with these three traditions in dialogue.

The eleven authors of this special issue all contributed in their own right to this valuable discussion, and in the future, more deliberations on the same themes will hopefully take place. This introductory discussion of their work is my own interpretation; and where I brought them in conversation with each other, it was done through my own creative linking of their themes. The conference and the special issue were not structured in a way that they responded to each other. Of course they (and others) are welcome, now that all the articles are published, to respond to each other, and to continue the dialogue in that way. In the conclusion of this special issue, Justin Sands identify some points for further reflection. He argues that all authors "partially (or perhaps provisionally) agree that liberation entails embodied communal responsibility as being-with others, the importance of transparent dialogue, the need for new rationalities to enter the discussion of African self-determination, while also highlighting the dangers of appropriating these new rationalities when bringing them into an African context or when moving theory into praxis" (Sands 2018b).

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