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## *The Contemporary Theological Project*

# The Challenge of Public Theology in the African Francophone Countries: The Case of Socio-Political Engagement of Churches and Theology

Joel Kuvuna Mbongi

### ABSTRACT

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The issue of public theology remains a significant barrier in most Francophone African countries. My doctoral thesis, “The Kairos in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Prophetic Voice within the Socio-Political Context of Instability,” confirms this. During discussions with church leaders in the Democratic Republic of Congo about public theology, it became evident that this endeavour posed significant difficulties. Some ecclesiastical authorities argue that politicians should handle politics, while “men of God” should focus on matters concerning the Kingdom of God. Certain scholars posit the existence of a flawed dualistic civilisation characterised by distinct sacred and secular realms. The Two Kingdoms theory, originating from the Protestant Christian tradition, espouses the notion that divine sovereignty extends over the entire universe, manifesting itself through two modes of governance. Lutherans adhere to specific teachings, and some adherents of Calvinism share their perspective. There is also a belief that theologians should focus exclusively on matters pertaining to the church.

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### Introduction

Public theology aims to provide the church, or the Christian faith, with a platform in the public sphere, positioning it as an equal participant alongside other voices, while upholding its unwavering commitment to its religious beliefs. The author subsequently questions the French interpretation of “secularism”, acknowledging its diminished capacity to exert dominance over society as it previously did. The primary objective of this endeavour is to make a meaningful contribution

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# “Let My People Go that They May Worship Me” – Interrogating Nicholas Bhengu’s Vision for the Nation

Tony Balcomb

## ABSTRACT

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Nicholas Bhekinkosi Bhengu (1909-1985) was a South African Christian evangelist who worked with the Assemblies of God in South Africa. He was the founder of the Back to God Crusade, one of the biggest self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing Christian missions on the African continent. His vision was for a renewed and revived continent that, through the Christian gospel, reflected the glories of its pre-colonial past. He articulated this vision in a landmark sermon preached on 10 October 1955 which resonated clearly with an address given by Pixley ka Isaka Seme, the “father” of the African National Congress, delivered at the Royal African Society at Oxford in 1906 entitled “The Regeneration of Africa”. But he refused to become part of the political struggle for emancipation and was considered by some leaders of the liberation struggle as a sellout. Despite this he has also been described as a protagonist of Black Consciousness and his impact on the oppressed African people was enormous. This remarkable anomaly makes him a fascinating figure in the struggle for liberation in South Africa and the relevance of his legacy for present day needs to be investigated.

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## Introduction

Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu (1909-1985) has been seen as a liberator of African people<sup>1</sup> as well as an apartheid stooge, an exponent of Black Consciousness, a Pentecostal preacher, a political quietist as well as a social activist. He also happened to initiate and lead one of the biggest, if not the biggest, self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting Christian missions in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

1 See A. Balcomb, “Nicholas Bhengu – The Impact of an African Pentecostal on South African Society” *Exchange*, 2005, vol 34, no. 4, 337-348.

2 Bigger movements than Bhengu’s in terms of the three selves are no doubt to be found among the African Independent Church movements. But the inclusion of these within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy is hotly debated and Bhengu was at pains to distance himself from these movements. Otherwise, there can be fewer movements within the recognized framework of Christian orthodoxy on the African continent bigger than Bhengu’s, unless, of course, one includes major denominations of European origin such as Methodism and Lutheranism, which themselves have secessionist histories.

# Self-validation of African Biblical Hermeneutics: A Necessary Post-colonial Consciousness in Re-imagining the Ancient Text

Barnard Olefile Mokwena

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## ABSTRACT

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This article used the occasion of the 2023 SBL Meeting held at the University of Pretoria to reflect on the importance of self-validation of African Biblical Hermeneutics as a hermeneutical posture of post-colonial consciousness in re-imagining the Ancient Text (the Bible) for African Christians. The overall hermeneutical context is that of Africa as a self-discerning continent which is constantly seeking to validate itself against the established norms and standards of coloniality. This colonial setting with its embedded Eurocentric-ancestry remains a hermeneutical struggle and is well recognised by African biblical scholars in their attempt to decolonise biblical interpretation through African Biblical Hermeneutics. A reflection on the self-validation of African Biblical Hermeneutics evokes many questions which signal that African Christians still trust their colonial heritage.

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## Introduction

I recently watched a Netflix documentary entitled “*The Unknown Lost Pyramid*” by two of the world’s most legendary Egyptologists. The documentary is enlightening and entertaining. However, of relevance here, is that Dr Zahi Hawass consistently argues that it is important for Egyptian archaeologists to excavate their history because Egyptian archaeology has been dominated and looted by Western archaeologists. The documentary is not just about showing the process of unearthing prehistoric artefacts, it is about Egyptians taking control of the story of their ancestry. This act of self-validation by Egyptian archaeologists resonates strongly with the complexities, dynamics and goals of post-colonial liberation Africa. In the context of biblical studies, Western hegemony and its Euro-ancestry philosophies have shaped thought on the theory and practice of biblical hermeneutics.

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# Beyond Disgust: Applying Albert Nolan's Relational Theology to Human Traffickers

Matthew C. Clarke

## ABSTRACT

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Human trafficking, also known as modern slavery, continues to be a massive social evil, directly affecting an estimated 50 million people globally. This article examines the idea that human trafficking is best framed as a violation of *shalom* and hence rooted in relational failure. The kind of relational theology espoused by Albert Nolan illuminates that framing in a way that suggests restorative responses beyond the rescue of victims/survivors and prosecution of traffickers. One barrier to such responses, however, is the psychology of disgust that often controls our responses to the people who perpetrate the abuses, exploitation, and coercion that fall under the umbrella category of human trafficking. Richard Beck's analysis of purity and disgust in Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees explains the way disgust impedes our ability to move toward those perpetrators. The article describes how aspects of Nolan's "spirituality of radical freedom" can help to overcome the barrier of disgust and provide theological insight into how we might more effectively understand and engage with traffickers.

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## Introduction

Near the beginning of the eight years I lived in South Africa in the 1990's, my understanding of the complex socio-political context was inspired by Albert Nolan's *God in South Africa*, especially by his account of sin within that book. My involvement with peace-making and social development was quietly informed by Nolan, though I only recognised the similarity of his approach to faith to my own Anabaptist commitments much later, when I read *Jesus Today*. In recent years my research has focused on the ineffectiveness of strategies to end human trafficking (also called modern slavery) and I have found that Nolan's insights into the way Jesus engaged with the challenges of human life became more explicitly helpful.

In this article, I show how Nolan's relational theology and "spirituality of radical freedom" might inform our understanding of the horrendous social problem of human trafficking. The purpose is neither to question nor extend Nolan's work, but to show how his approach can be applied to a context that differs significantly

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# Book Reviews

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Israel Kamudzandu. *Translation as Incarnation: The Bible in the Twenty-First Century Global South. Colonial and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation.*

Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-4982-2128-3. Paperback. Includes Table of Contents and Index. 146 pp.

Israel Kamudzandu tells the story of the introduction, translation, and incarnation of the Bible in the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America). The Bible was introduced into the Global South by European missionaries and colonizers as a weapon of colonization to “civilize” people, invade their lands, and profit from their resources (Chapter One). Missionaries and colonizers both viewed Western cultural and religious practices as superior to all others. While missionaries focused on evangelization and technological development, colonizers exploited indigenous lands and resources. The agendas of these two groups did diverge given they were part of a twin colonizing project.

In the colonial classroom (Chapter Two) Global South students were taught the Bible for their moral improvement. The Bible was taught to students to help them learn how to become more European. Naturally, students in the Global South were suspicious of the Bible. Nevertheless, in schools, students initiated a process of “synthesizing” and “hybridizing” Western and Global South cultures and religions. Schools became catalysts for students to undergo cultural and religious transformation and political and ideological conscientization. Some students, such as Canaan Banana, perceived a different Bible, recasting the Bible for cultural and political liberation in the early independence era (22, 98).

A major shift occurred in the various contexts of the Global South when missionaries initiated the linguistic translation and publication of the Bible (Chapter Three). Bible translation depended on the translation skills of indigenous Global South agents who had been trained to be evangelists, pastors, and teachers. When the Bible was translated into vernacular languages, using the technology of the printing press, people used their newly acquired literacy skills adding them to their flourishing practices of orality, to appropriate the Bible into their sacred cultural worlds through a process of worldview synthesis (14, 51, 84).

The translated Bible was accompanied by outpourings of the Spirit, healings, and encounters with the risen Christ (chapter four). People of the Global South perceived that their world was more like the Mediterranean world of the Bible than

## Contents

Editorial

Biographical Notes of Authors

### The Contemporary Theological Project

The Challenge of Public Theology in the African Francophone Countries: The Case of Socio-Political Engagement of Churches and Theology

*Joel Kuvuna Mbongi*

### Articles

“Let My People Go that They May Worship Me”  
– Interrogating Nicholas Bhengu’s Vision for the Nation

*Tony Balcomb*

Self-validation of African Biblical Hermeneutics:  
A Necessary Post-colonial Consciousness in Re-  
imagining the Ancient Text

*Barnard Olefile Mokwena*

Beyond Disgust: Applying Albert Nolan’s Relational  
Theology to Human Traffickers

*Matthew C. Clarke*

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