

Introduction

Discrimination is a worldwide phenomenon that cuts across communities, cultures, religions and societies. Throughout the centuries, people in almost every context have faced discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, race and other factors. Religion, which ought to propagate and promote peace, unity and reconciliation, has unfortunately contributed to conflict, intolerance, religious violence and discrimination globally. Taking cognizance of its own checkered history of exclusion over the years, in 2017 the Faculty of Theology and Religion adopted as its centenary theme “*Gateway to ___*”. The idea was to reflect on ‘open gates’ which speak to the deliberate desire to promote equity, inclusiveness and diversity. With regard to this endeavour, the Faculty has travelled far in working for justice, inclusivity and transformation.

The University of Pretoria has adopted a comprehensive anti-discrimination policy. One aspect of the initiative to publicise the policy was that the Faculty of Theology and Religion spearhead a drive to examine anti-discrimination from a faith perspective. Thus, in September 2021 the Faculty hosted a webinar that addressed various themes of anti-discrimination. This publication is an outcome of that initiative, in which some Faculty staff members contributed to conversations about anti-discrimination from different angles. This introduction provides a summary of what is covered in the publication.

Focusing on discrimination, Dr Hlulani Mdingi draws our attention to a ‘refocus on race’ as a critical factor in the South African context. We know that racism is still prevalent in South Africa and other parts of the world. He reminds us of the contributions of Steve Biko and the focus on black power which brought about changes in the fields of psychology, economics, beauty, intellect, culture and faith – all leading to black empowerment, and appreciation of black identity and the black person. Hlulani points us to the significant role of black liberation theology in affirming the rights, dignity and humanity of black people in South Africa, whilst simultaneously resisting white oppression and racism. He observes that black theology today “must be engaged in all facets of life, including to say its piece on policy, definition and acts of racism”.

Prof Ernest van Eck argues that ethnicity, not ‘race’, is the critical issue. He argues that ‘race’ is a relatively modern concept and that from a certain perspective it is the root of racism itself. He proposes a focus instead on ethnicity. He elucidates his argument by exploring how the Apostle Paul addressed ethnic differences

in early Christianity. As a New Testament scholar, Ernest then offers suggestions regarding how Paul's encounters might be used to overcome racial categories and create a new social and cultural identity at the University of Pretoria.

Prof Zoro Dube poses the question: "Why do you see my ethnicity, gender and class, instead of my need?" Drawing on the biblical story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, he believes that we tend to focus on race, culture or gender, which then become determining factors in how we respond to people's needs. Zoro asserts that when we focus on an individual's needs, rather than on their background or their sense of identity, we are better equipped to address issues of discrimination in society and across the world.

Taking the conversation about gender discrimination in a different direction, Prof Tanya van Wyk advocates a nonbinary approach to women, the womb and gender. She asks: "What is a nonbinary approach that will proactively focus on preventing discrimination?" Tanya questions whether we are sufficiently critical of forms of power that maintain the status quo. She relates her argument to the ways in which the Faculty of Theology and Religion needs to critically address issues of equality, exclusion of women and culture. Tanya calls for an ecofeminist theology in the Faculty that engages with UN Sustainable Development Goal 5.

8

One of the rising forms of discrimination in the world today relates to human sexuality. This causes extensive friction, factionalism and fragmentation in Christian churches in particular. Prof Jaco Beyers tackles the issue of religious fundamentalism and violence in society with regard to LGBT+ people, focusing on violence against LGBT+ people in Uganda. Using this case study, Jaco considers the role that the Faculty and the University of Pretoria might play in preparing students to respond appropriately when discrimination occurs.

Holy Scriptures can certainly be a basis for discrimination; this has been seen throughout the ages. Prof Sias Meyers raises the question of whether the Bible should be seen as part of the problem or as part of the solution. Given his expertise as an Old Testament scholar, he refers to Old Testament texts to make his point. Sias argues that historical knowledge of texts and their context can contribute to more responsible interpretations of biblical texts. He uses this idea to explore ancient understandings of morality, in comparison with modern perspectives, pointing out that we need biblical texts to help us understand issues of discrimination today.

Another Old Testament scholar, Prof Ananda Geysler-Fouche, discusses how language is used to discriminate against people. She examines why exclusive

language is used and links her discussion to certain Old Testament texts. Ananda asks what we can learn from the Old Testament to address discrimination through power games in language. Language can be an oppressive and discriminatory tool when not used sensitively and mindfully.

Finally, Prof Christo Lombaard addresses faith diversity at the University of Pretoria from what he describes as the perspective of 'non-theological' arguments. He calls into question what non-religious, a-religious or atheist positions mean in relation to matters of faith. He maintains that a neutral position on faith is still a position. Christo argues that there is no position outside of the economy, sexuality, power and religion: the human condition is such that we are inescapably implicated in such matters. Therefore, positioning oneself outside these considerations is either naïve or self-deceptive. He concludes that values derived from religion are just as important as religion-free values; neither should be considered exclusive.

This publication cannot be exhaustive. Many other forms of discrimination also need to be considered. However, contributors to the publication have examined discrimination from a faith perspective. They have focused on some of the major forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture and language. We encounter much of this on a daily basis.

The objective of this publication is to initiate a conversation on anti-discrimination at UP, to help focus on and popularise the UP anti-discrimination policy. I sincerely hope that this publication will stimulate discussion and steer further conversations on this most significant subject at UP, in South Africa and across the globe. Discrimination in a variety of forms persists. We need to get to the roots of discrimination, confronting it with courage and hope as we seek to build a better world for all people and all creation, based on love, unity, peace and reconciliation.

Prof Jerry Pillay

Dean: Faculty of Theology and Religion