

## AMERICAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIO-HISTORICAL LIBERATION THEOLOGY RECIPROCATIVE INFLUENCES

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### Abstract

*The paper meanders through American and South African liberation theology. Underlining the thoughts and influences of charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, James Cone, and Allan Boesak are the historical sociology of two distinct religious spaces, South Africa and the United States of America. Each region had an influence on the other, sometimes both implicitly and deliberately, but most times inadvertently. Christianity was joined by Islam in both regions in establishing a liberating praxis. But more so in America where James Cone suggests his liberation theology to have been a direct response to the Nation of Islam's Malcolm X. In the end, it was the synthesis and influences of a number of religious ideas including Mohandas Gandhi's Hinduism/Jainism, Islam, Christianity, Nation of Islam and Garveyism that were used in whatever form necessary to socialize a "liberating praxis" or "rational study."*

**Key words:** Liberating praxis, Rational study, Liberation theology, Passive resistance

### Introduction

After the Second World War the institutions of apartheid imposed an ever-tighter stranglehold on the social and political life of South Africa. Religious institutions were not immune. The Dutch Reformed Church, dominated by the country's white *Afrikaans* community, provided the theological justification for racial discrimination and social oppression. The development of this *Afrikaner* version of Calvinist Christianity nurtured the interrelatedness of church and state, particularly after 1945. The mythology surrounding the Afrikaners' "Great Trek" (starting 1835) served as a unifying experience, helping to propel the dream of an Afrikaner state and a distinctly Afrikaner religion. Christian denominations outside the Dutch Reform structure found themselves either marginalized or neutralized, reflecting the broader divisions and power relationships within the country.

The crackdown following the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, including the arrest of Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, and Albert Luthuli, significantly hampered the anti-apartheid activities of the ANC and PAC. With much of the political opposition jailed or in exile, some religious leaders found themselves compelled to take a stand, although many others remained silent. Christian leaders such as the Rev Allan Boesak and the Rev Desmond Tutu found ways to express a social conscience with an increasingly strong voice, joining together in interdenominational protest.

This essay will concentrate on Christian developments. Interdenominational discussions within Christianity and Islam were also important. To bear in mind, it was the broadness of interfaith dialogue that provided a more coherent and committed liberation theology, one that was politically forceful and more relevant. Just as apartheid had combined religious ideology

and political aims, so too did the religious leaders who increasingly criticized apartheid's systematization of cruelty and discrimination. Furthermore, although the dialogue between South African Christian and Muslim leaders was crucial, there was also a substantial influence from abroad. In particular, by comparing American and South African liberationists I will explore the strategies and ideologies that were used in the struggle against oppression in both countries. Among the Americans, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Cone were particularly influential, helping to form the perspectives of such South Africans as Steven Biko, Allan Boesak and Beyers Naudé. Many of these figures attempted to embrace elements of both Islam and Christianity in a complex maneuvering of theology to develop a praxis that would then be relevant for their own individual communities.

### **Black Consciousness: 'Black Man, You are on Your Own'**

A unique quality of the Christian liberation struggle in South Africa lay in the origins of black churches as missionary sister churches of their white counterparts, and the existence of a black majority in the country. By contrast, in the United States whites far outnumbered the blacks, and blacks tended to form their own separate churches. In South Africa the black churches were normally part of a larger, white-controlled administrative structure. Only later, mostly through the influence of American missionaries, did independent African churches start to flourish. Being dependent upon the founding church for both doctrine and finances may go part way to explaining why South African black Christians remained under the spell of apartheid for so long. Many black Christians saw white Christians as brethren in Christ. Their belief in a fair and just God drove a hope, it seemed, that justice would ultimately prevail. Intriguingly, this principle is mirrored in many themes propounded by Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.'s liberation struggle in the United States.

The white people who had introduced Christianity to the natives presented a picture of a God possessing white skin and, more often than not, blue eyes. Invested in the imagery of this white God was everything that was supposed to be good and virtuous. As often happens when religions are passed from one group to another, the one who succeeds in promoting the "superior" religion generally gains the right to maintain a role as educator and disseminator of that religion. In South Africa the white man had that leading role, and could use it to disseminate a theology presuming white supremacy and determined to maintain the status quo. Identity of self is often wrapped up in the definition people make of the "Other." To the oppressed in South Africa the "Other" was white and Christian. For those who were black and Christian self-definition was problematic given the inequalities of a social environment that used Christian thought to legitimate the devaluing of blacks. Christians who were liberal and white could apologize for the inequities and injustices of apartheid, but criticizing the present system did little to help blacks define themselves. The murdered black activist Steven Biko provides this account of the initial stages to constructing a black consciousness in the South African context:

Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude. Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being. Briefly defined, Black consciousness is in essence the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white (Biko, 49).

Theologically speaking, black consciousness takes cognizance of the deliberateness of

God's plan in creating black people black. Steven Biko's enunciation of black consciousness leaves one with a sense of a black people wanting to regain pride in their value systems, culture, and religion. Biko wanted blacks to take personal responsibility, politically or otherwise. Writing about the "Sprocas" commissions ("Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society") set up by the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute in 1968, he said they had failed to make meaningful headway because they were always looking for "an alternative acceptable to the white man," a critique directed at Beyers Naudé as well since he belonged to the Sprocas commission. Everybody in the Sprocas commissions, Biko said, knew what was right but all were looking for the most seemly way of dodging the responsibility of saying what is right (Biko, 90). In the end, Biko came to believe the phrase, "Black man you are on your own," as the only viable alternative.

Black consciousness was a force white liberation theologians had to face, and work with, in order to formulate a liberating praxis for Christianity. Sparks tells us that Naudé in particular drew on the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who resisted the Nazification of the German Evangelical Church in the 1930s: It was not enough simply to disapprove of the status quo as a conscious-stricken member of the privileged class; one had to "do theology from the lower side" (285). Naudé and a few other white clergy took on the challenge, at least psychologically, and won many admirers from across the colour bar. In particular, Allan Boesak is reported to have said, "it was Beyers Naudé who prevented his anger from turning into anti-whiteism (Sparks, 285). In fact, Beyers Naudé would come to be accepted as the father of the Christian liberation struggle, who in many ways eased the transition to the non-racism of the post-apartheid era. Naudé became a role model for both white and black people. Naudé showed that not all white people were racists and many, both black and white, came to realize that despite Biko's claims black people were not in fact on their own in the struggle for liberation. However, one could argue that Beyers Naudé was not black enough to win over black Christians who had become decidedly disenchanted with the church and its policies on apartheid. Perhaps they needed a new prophet, a black one, to lead them back. Their prayers, so to speak, were answered in the person of Allan Boesak.

Boesak was a member of the Sending Kerk, the 'Coloured' arm of the Afrikaner Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. The Afrikaner church educated him and would later pay his salary, yet arguably he became its greatest opponent. Put candidly, he was the right person for the job: An insider with an axe to grind. For Boesak liberation theology in South Africa should marry black power and black theology without alienating white Christians. Boesak defined black theology as the theological reflection of black Christians on the situation in which they live and on the struggle for liberation (Boesak, 9). It was a different continent but it sounded so much like the messages of James H Cone in the United States of America.

Like most liberation theologians, Boesak needed to face the accusation raised in Karl Marx's critique of religions: Religions are real as they genuinely highlight the plight of the masses but fall short by only offering a solution in an afterlife. In line with Marx, Boesak suggested that behind the concerns of liberation theology, and the challenges it posed for the Christian Church, are the realities often ignored by the theologies of the Western world. These included the realities of rich and poor, of white and black, of oppressors and oppressed, of oppression, and liberation from oppression (Boesak, 10). Like Marx, he suggested that rather than confronting the grievances of the indigent masses, "The Christian Church had chosen to move through history with a bland kind of innocence, hiding painful truths behind a façade of myths and the motivation of real or imagined anxieties" (Boesak, 10). In essence the Church remained silent. The Christian liberation theology developed by Boesak and his mentors

forced the Church to speak out against oppression. As Boesak pointed out, "For the Christian Church it constitutes, in no uncertain terms, a farewell to innocence" (10). In sum, religion could not remain the "pacifier" or "the opium of the masses," as Karl Marx had put it. The Church had to take a position by offering praxis, a path of right conduct, in the face of the subjugation that the blacks of this world so often had to endure.

Boesak was not operating from within a South African bubble. His most profound influences came from the American continent, the foremost being James Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez. For both Cone and Gutierrez Christianity needed to be invited directly into their backyards: Christianity was to become part of their respective social experience in the here and now. James Cone saw his thesis as the claim that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America (Cone, 17). With this introduction Cone invited black nationalists back to Christianity. The Christian church in the United States also witnessed many black Christians converting to Islam. Some would argue due to the lack of a liberating praxis. Christianity's racist past and lack of accommodation for black people, according to liberationists like Malcolm X, is said to be the reason for their abandonment of Christianity. Cone's liberal view of a more universal Christianity favoured the South African situation. Just as in America increasing numbers of blacks in South Africa were fast becoming disillusioned with Christianity. Unlike in America, South African blacks were generally not converting to Islam as its South African form carried with it its own kind of racism against black people.

Gustavo Gutierrez's arguments on the topic are in line with Cone's thinking where he asserts:

Black Theological reflection takes place in the context of the authentic experience of God in the black worshipping community. That worship is, and has always been, about freedom under the reign of God...But the worship of the Black Church cannot be separated from its life and ethical praxis. It is in the struggle against racism and oppression that the Black Church creates and recreates its theological understanding of the faith and expresses it in shouts of praise and sounds of struggle for the liberation of the oppressed (Gutierrez, 7-15).

Even though James Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez concur on many of the underlying themes of liberation theology, the praxis they propose differs. Boesak tells us that James Cone sees theology as "the rational study of the being of God in the world in the light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ," while Boesak interprets Gutierrez as believing the Word of God is incarnated in the community of faith, which gives itself to the service of mankind (Boesak, 15). This activity of the Church as the community of faith, Gutierrez points out, must be the starting point of all theological reflection. For Gutierrez the focus is on praxis: A commitment of service to others. In his development of a liberation theology during apartheid, Boesak favours the Gutierrez's praxis over Cone's "rational study."

### **More American Influences**

Blacks on the two continents have often seen themselves as brothers and sisters of the African diaspora. In both North America and South Africa Christianity made its way to their respective societies via the white man. In the 1960s and 1970s blacks on both sides of the world were fighting similar social injustice perpetrated by the very people who had brought them the gospel of Jesus Christ. By this time both groups had come to understand the gospel as a means to liberate their peoples both politically and culturally. Both environments produced individuals, like Malcolm X and Allan Boesak, with a heightened

religiosity spurred on by the ills that slavery, colonialism, and imperialism had brought to their respective continents. Christianity and Islam in the long run would seem relevant to a black individual only if they addressed the broader issues of social inequality, political oppression and economic deprivation in black communities. Within Christianity assimilationists such as Martin Luther King Jr. promoted non-violent protest. In the 1960s Malcolm X and his Nation of Islam were taking a strong stance in the opposite direction, deriding the goal of integration in developing black power and black consciousness.

Malcolm X embodied many of the elements so crucial to the South African struggle: Islam, Christianity, race, and African Nationalism. Born into a Christian family, influenced by his father's Garveyite African nationalism, he converted to Islam and committed himself to the fight for racial justice. In his formative years Malcolm X's father, the Reverend Earl Little, taught his son a gospel mixing Christianity and Garveyism (Lomax, 12). It would be fair to assume, then, that the philosophy of Marcus Garvey played a decisive role on Malcolm X's early thought. Garvey, a Jamaican by birth, promoted an African nationalism from his headquarters in Harlem, USA. Garvey contended that slavery had alienated blacks from their African culture and so had eroded their self-respect. Garvey claimed the only way to restore lost African nationalism and self-respect was through a boat trip back to Africa. Garvey's novel "back-to-Africa" policy had obvious appeal, as it seems to have inspired many blacks. In sum, the notion of a return to Africa gave the black person a sense of pride—a sense of belonging—a sense of having roots. One could also argue that this emphasis on Africa strengthened the bond between blacks in South Africa and the United States when black South Africans were later fighting for their lives under the oppressive regime of apartheid.

Malcolm X was not as successful as his father in reconciling Garveyite African nationalism with Christianity. He was sold on the African nationalism but the Christianity was less appealing. James Cone tells us that the death of Malcolm's father in 1931 ended his attendance at meetings of the Garveyites, the only group that had made him proud to be black. Christianity on the other hand lacked appeal for the young Malcolm (154). Christian liberation theology was only a whisper on the scene at this time, and the strong-willed Malcolm X began distancing himself from the religion of his youth, in which God was white-skinned and blue-eyed. That religion could hardly accommodate the kind of faith he later described: "I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won't let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion" (Malcolm X, 140).

Malcolm X turned to The Nation of Islam for his salvation, and that of his people. This version of Islam claimed Allah's messenger to be a black man called Elijah Muhammad, and that in fact, "the white man is the devil" (Malcolm X, 155). The founder of this religion, Master Wallace D Farrad, told blacks their true religion was Islam, not the "white man's religion" of Christianity, and eventually the universal black nation would emerge as the rulers of the earth (Essien-Udom, 4). Imprisoned at the time of his epiphany, Malcolm X believed he had found the religion of his ancestors. Its portrayal of the white man in many ways explained to him the injustices done both to him personally and to black people in general. Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam offered black people a system to operate under with minimal need to interact with white people.

James Cone points out that the Nation of Islam was specifically designed to address the spiritual, social, economic, and political needs of the black underclass, particularly those in prisons and urban ghettos (33). Malcolm X had discovered in an Islam combined with African nationalism an organization that spoke to him: "It just clicked," in his words (Cone,



8). Black nationalists such as Malcolm X believed that black people in America were primarily Africans and not American. They were not overly concerned with the constitution, the American Declaration of Independence, or for that matter Christianity. Their primary grief was the oppression meted out by American whites. Rejecting the term "Negro," they opted for terminology such as "black" or "African." In a 1964 speech at the Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, he repudiated his American identity and staked out his position as a black nationalist:

No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the ... victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver-no, not I! I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare! (Cone, 1).

Such stirring words appealed to many opponents of apartheid in South Africa, particularly proponents of black consciousness and the country's Muslims. The strong commitment to black independence and the pan-African flavour of Malcolm's message attracted many black liberationists. The fact that Malcolm had converted to Islam had obvious appeal to the Muslims of South Africa. Malcolm X was a role model that Muslims in South Africa sought. Like them, Malcolm was a descendant of slaves and a Muslim too. The idea that one of their own stood at the forefront of the American liberation struggle was welcomed since South African Muslims had known oppression from their first day of setting foot in the country.

However, the parallels were inexact. In its South African context the Muslim experience differed in many ways from the American Muslim experience. Muslims in South Africa, both "Coloured" and "Indian," had bought into the apartheid system, and for most, considered themselves superior to the black man. For the most, Islam in South Africa remained a "Coloured" or "Indian" religion and embedded in this experience lays a racism that collided with everything Malcolm X stood, and eventually died for. There were a few Muslims who were influenced and motivated by the thoughts of Malcolm X and set about developing their own liberation theology and struggle. Many of these individuals, such as Imam Abdulla Haron, belonged to the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) Party, a rival political organization to the African National Congress (ANC). Abdulla Haron was the most notable of the Muslim black consciousness group.

Be that as it may, Malcolm X's critique of Christianity is also applicable to the history of Christianity in South Africa. In his autobiography he describes a racist, exploitative legacy of the Christian church on the African continent: The Christian church became infected with racism when it entered white Europe. The Christian church returned to Africa under the banner of the Cross – conquering, killing, exploiting, pillaging, raping, bullying, beating – and teaching white supremacy. The white man has perverted the simple message of love that the Prophet Jesus lived and taught when he walked upon the earth (Malcolm, 285).

The central message of Malcolm's statement is hard to deny but there are many black Christians and white Christians who fall outside the ambit of this scathing critique. James Cone, a black theologian, constructed his response to Malcolm's challenge. In Cone's view, "The rise of Black Power and black theology was largely due to the influence of Malcolm X" (Cone, 89). In turn, the influence that Cone had over the likes of Boesak and Desmond Tutu is well documented. Therefore black Christian liberation theology in South Africa is at the very least an indirect response to Malcolm X's critique. As noted earlier, James Cone particularly influenced Allan Boesak. In his text *Farewell to Innocence*, Boesak asserted:

“Black Theology, emerging within the context of the theology of liberation, also denotes a fundamentally different approach to Christian theology, a new way of looking at the world we live in and at the responsibility of the Church in the world. Black Theology signifies an irreversible reordering of the ecumenical agenda” (Boesak, 5). Of particular interest to Boesak was an examination of the relationship between Black Theology and Black Power from a Christian social-ethics perspective. Boesak believed it could be found in James Cone’s bold statement: “It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ’s central message to twentieth-century America” (Cone, 1). According to Boesak, this statement, as controversial as it sounds, is of singular importance for all Christians as it centres not only on the “involvement of the Church in politics,” but also on the authentic witness of the Church to the presence of God in our history (Boesak, 10). Whatever the means might have been, Malcolm X succeeded in eliciting a response from black Christians like Cone and Boesak.

### **Welcoming Black Christians Back into the Fold**

James Cone’s Christian theology was absorbed into the South African fold primarily through texts, yet he also warned against taking any theology out of context: “Theology is not universal language about God. Rather, it is human speech informed by historical and theological traditions, and written for particular times and places” (Cone, xiii). However, the context was similar enough between America and South Africa to provide considerable inspiration to anti-apartheid Christians. He had taken Jesus and baptized him black, figuratively and often times literally, making the Christian Messiah a force for liberation, not subjugation, in the African-American community. Boesak believed that this movement of ideas was not a one-way street. Not only has there been a black theology for as long as white Christians had been preaching the gospel to blacks in South Africa, there had always been strong ties between black Christians in South Africa and the United States. Blacks in America had drawn upon their African religious resources in order to develop their own understanding of Christianity. If blacks in America accepted their African roots then black theology becomes an aspect of African theology. Furthermore, says Boesak, “Not all African theology on the other hand is Black Theology, but the converse: That all Black Theology ... is African Theology” (33). What is certain is that both groups were contributing to each other’s development.

Even if Boesak and Cone held similar ideas, it was more difficult for Boesak to implement his view “on the ground.” Working from within the constraints of the Afrikaner church and apartheid, he struggled to develop a black liberation theology through text. He found he had to modify his approach by incorporating a more immediate praxis, just as Gutierrez had preferred a “praxis” to Cone’s “rational study.” One approach to combining these two approaches was seen in the US when Martin Luther King, Jr. moved his struggle for liberation out of the churches and into the streets. His *modus operandi* was one of non-violence, modeled on Mohandas Gandhi’s. In a curious bit of history, Gandhi had first formulated and implemented his methods in South Africa before he moved to the larger stage of India. Passive resistance was just one of King’s tools, another was using the media to his advantage. James Colaiaco points out: “Not only did the media help to propel King to international prominence, but it would provide the publicity essential to the success of the militant, non-violent method he espoused” (Colaiaco, 11). In a similar fashion Boesak soon learned to use the media to promote his message. Through the trans-Atlantic intermediary of King’s example he employed a similar method in South Africa decades later.

King was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and like Malcolm X was the son of a Christian minister. Unlike Malcolm X, whose childhood included the loss of both parents at an early age, King spent his formative years in a relatively stable environment, with the love and support of both parents as well as the Christian community served by his father. Cone notes the crucial role the Christian church played in protecting people like King in the twentieth century: The church was the dominant institution in the social life of Atlanta's African-American community, serving as the source for leadership development and also providing the moral values which leaders used to achieve justice for blacks. It also erected a protective shelter against the hostile white world. (20)

In many ways, King had come to rely on an all-black social infrastructure that provided loving and protecting solidarity, while Malcolm found a similar sense of belonging and protection only after enduring much injustice at the hands of the white man. It is no wonder that King's praxis was based on love and battle through passive resistance while Malcolm X promoted a far more fervent mode of attaining liberation. King believed justice for blacks in America could be achieved through love. The concept of martyrdom as practiced by the early Christians somewhat reflects the methodology he employed: Seeking justice by non-violent means. Justice in this instance meant "Negroes" being treated with dignity and respect. Love in this instance did not mean "Negroes" should love whites, but rather, "Negroes" should have the courage to stand up for their rights against whites who humiliated and assaulted them. However, in the struggle for freedom King and Malcolm X shared the primary goal of any liberation struggle: To stand up strong against oppression and injustice. In a similar fashion Christian liberationists in South Africa came to see these as primary goals, especially during the last years of apartheid's reign. As much as Boesak invoked a liberation theology similar to his American friend Cone's, he had to take the battle to the streets like Martin King. Very few marches from the 1970s on were without the figure of Boesak, clenched fist in the air, leading a procession of protesters.

### **A Concluding Look**

Liberation theology in the United States and South Africa influenced each other in a cross-pollination of protest techniques and theological calls for justice. American liberationists influenced Allan Boesak, and his black African forefathers had influenced the Americans. A gifted orator, Boesak borrowed the methods of peaceful resistance of Martin Luther King, Jr., the textual nuances of liberation theology of the genius James Cone, and the African nationalism of Malcolm X. If Christianity could not offer the black person existential truth then the Nation of Islam was willing to fill the void. The Nation of Islam offered to many blacks a chance to regain dignity and self-respect, more often than not in the prisons and slums of America. Malcolm X came to believe in the redemptive power of his organization to such an extent that he declared, "Show me a black rapist and thief and I'll show you a black Christian" (Cone, 76). One would like to believe that in this statement lays the deep disdain not for Christianity but for Christianity that the white man had come to portray and sell.

In order to win black people back into the Christian fold of America, Christianity had to become "black" in a way Dietrich Bonhoeffer had to become "Jewish" during Nazi Germany or Beyers Naudé "black" during apartheid. If all religions have a prophet then the prophet of black Christian liberation has to be James H. Cone. Cone admits that Malcolm influenced him more than Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, he is said to have developed black liberation theology in direct response to Malcolm's criticism on Christianity (Cone, 89).



His genius stretches way beyond the American continent. It can be said that James Cone is black liberation theology.

There are many ways of fighting a battle. Martin Luther King, Jr. supported the non-violent way. He spoke out and marched against the evils of racial segregation. Both the South Africans and King had the same role model: Mahatma Gandhi. It was a Christian message of love coupled with uncompromising need for justice that drove Martin Luther King, Jr. and it was that honest drive that inspired the world, including Boesak.

In the end, at least in South Africa, Christians, and others, could unite under the banner of the UDF. The strength of this union would prove to be too strong for an evil as blatantly unjust as apartheid. Unfortunately, in the fight for racial justice people, good people, often pay for freedom with their lives. Most of the great men alluded to in this essay had to go that route. In the spirit of Christianity, and others: "May God have mercy on our souls."

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