

AN ORIENTATION TO BLACK THEOLOGY AS A HERMENEUTIC OF SUFFERING *

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Abstract

Black Liberation Theology is a theology of protest against Western Christianity which traditionally preached an irrelevant and dominating gospel. It is also a theology born out of the suffering of blacks, women and marginalized peoples.

As such, liberation theology grows out of a hermeneutic of suffering. Its constant aim is to correct the debased form of the gospel message toward justice and liberation, as expounded by the oppressor. Apart from the Bible as its primary source, black liberation theology also draws upon the experience of the black community and the black church.

It is a liberation theology in the sense that it strives for freedom from alienation, dehumanisation and domination. It is the lived experience of people in line with their reading and understanding of Scripture, which opens up a new future for the oppressed. Within such a liberation theology, the redemptive power of Jesus Christ is generated by the oppressed for themselves and for the salvation of those who oppress. This is the faith of the suffering people.

I

In South Africa Black Theology can be traced as far back as the African Independent Churches. Although much research will still have to be done in connection with the theological reasons for the schism between these churches, it is

* The purpose of this article is to present a brief and popular introduction to black theology.

nevertheless clear that they separated themselves from the traditional white churches as a protest-movement.

The first black person to establish a Separatist Church in 1884, was Nehemia Tile. Prior to the founding, he was a Wesleyan evangelist. Today this movement, founded by Tile, exists in over 3 000 separate groups. Later, in 1893, Moses Mokone, another Wesleyan, founded the Ethiopian Church - a church which totally rejected white management. This church must be seen in the context of a long history of black reaction against white domination.

This was the beginning of suspicion and reaction against the 'foreign' character of white-dominated Christianity. Non-Christian blacks became suspicious of the missionaries, because in their missions they attempted to 'de-Africanize' black people.

The main reason for the formation of these churches possibly was not only political, but the rejection of the personality and dignity of blacks within the Church. In this connection Mokgethi Motlhabi mentions reasons like '...lack of participation in decision-making processes, the unwillingness of missionaries to prepare local leadership for eventual take-over by blacks, money disputes, etc.' (Black Theology Revisited: 1983,19) The black person was not a colleague, but rather a servant (in his own church) to the white. Furthermore, all that was basic to blacks, was ignored. Their own religious life, philosophy, psychology, culture and traditions were very often rejected and trampled on as if non-existent - or as though demonic. As such, the white man's theology was accused of selfishness and racial discrimination, which led to poverty and deprivation among black people.

A community spirit is dominant in the Separatist movement: when they pray, dance, sing, witness, or when ancestral spirits enter into them, the communal aspect is the guiding force and only then are the religious activities effective in their own circles. Here the liturgy is rich and meaningful. Liturgy is practical theology, through which the message is conveyed. Therefore, God's Word and hymns, symbols and pictures must be meaningful in an African context. There must be identification. The context of Manenberg, Soweto, Kruispad, Heideveld and Langa had to be stamped on Christianity, and not (only) Geneva, Kampen, Oxford and Princeton. In this sense Black Theology is a protest against an interpretation and understanding of the Gospel according to whites.

II

Thus far, in the African tradition, Black Theology had not been articulated.

On the other hand, people like B Idowa, C G Baëta, E Adegbola and especially John Mbiti in the established churches, brought new appreciation to theology in an African context. In political and also theological circles the personality of blacks was stressed, and simultaneously black Africa began to 'demythologize' Western culture

and the white man. Hence we later found that movements like the ANC and PAC started to become strongly Africa-centred.

It was especially the influence of the Afro-Americans Marcus Garvey and W E du Bois that was strongly felt. Now the motto was: common blackness must be expressed in the consciousness thereof: black consciousness. The reason for this was obvious: to give black people selfrespect and pride - especially where they were regarded as inferior. This brings us to the USA and Southern Africa.

Any form of paternalism had to be opposed and confronted with black consciousness. To 'think' black was now the main imperative. A correct evaluation and the true humanity of blacks could only be realized through group identity. To attain this meant to shake off white paternalism. This was to take place on the social as well as the religious level of life.

Theologically, God's actions in the situation in which blacks found themselves, had to be interpreted according to the black experience. As such black people soon found that God was also God of the oppressed, that God was also God of the poor. In this sense, God is different to what was taught by 'white theology'. God is also a God of liberation - on the spiritual as well as social levels of life. The old definition of black being inferior and subhuman, was now re-interpreted with a new and more positive connotation of dignity and humanity. In this connection, James Cone mentioned the following:

'In a situation like this, there is only one course of action for the black community, and that is to destroy the oppressor's definition of blackness by unraveling new meanings in old tales so that the past may emerge as an instrument of black liberation' (Cone, 1970,39).

It is here that we find the transition from black consciousness to Black Theology. Black Theology is nothing less than the articulation and interpretation of black consciousness. Articulation in the sense, that blacks are conscious of their being truly created in the image of the living God; interpretation in the sense of their struggle out of their own existence as being worthy before God and His Word.

Hence, we can say that Black Theology lies on the same level as Political Theology and Liberation Theology, although there are differences and nuances in the point of departure. Political Theology is a reaction against the results of the enlightenment and secularisation as expressed in existential, personal and transcendental theology; representatives being for example Johann Metz, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle. Political Theology aims to bridge the attenuation of faith to the private individualistic sphere, by establishing a new hermeneutic as to the relation of theory and praxis.

Liberation Theology developed as a reaction against oppression and injustice in Latin American countries. Its primary task is to alter the symbols of the Christian faith for the concrete situation and praxis in Latin America. Representatives here are: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff, Hugo Asmann, Rubem Alves and Frederick Herzog.

III

Representatives of Black Theology in the USA are for example James Hal Cone, J Deotis Roberts, Major Jones, William Jones, Gayrad Wilmore, Henry Mitchell, Joseph R Washington, C Eric Lincoln and Albert Cleage (now known as Jaramogi Abebe Ajieman). In South Africa we have, among others, Gabriel Setiloane, Desmond Tutu, Manas Buthelezi, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane, Mohgethi Motlhabi, Bonganjola Goba and Simon Maimela.

Black Theology, as an intellectual discipline, has evolved (thanks to James Cone of America. Regarding the origin of Black Theology, most American black theologians refer to four sources, namely the Bible, the black experience, the black church and the influence of African culture on the religion and religious experience of blacks. Furthermore, most black theologians rely on Protestant theologians - from Karl Barth to Jürgen Moltmann and Harvey Cox.

Cone, especially, proves how a radical, but historically correct interpretation of a Bible story and a thorough study and reading of Paul Tillich, Albert Camus and Franz Fanon leads to the conclusion that Black Power is the manifestation of 'being black' and 'being human' in opposition to the inhumanity of white racism. He says:

'It would seem that Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man! If the work of Christ is that of liberating men from alien loyalties, and racism is ... an alien faith, then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity ... Black Power is the power to say NO; it is the power of blacks to refuse to cooperate in their own dehumanization. If blacks can trust the message of Christ, if they can take him at his word, this power to say No to white power and domination is derived from him' (Cone 1969, 39ff).

It is evident that Black Theology is a theology of action, also stressing the horizontal level, in opposition to the more vertical pietistic accent of the missionary - in spite of the fact that he also built hospitals and schools. Liberation now also means freedom from political structures. Pietism is accused of being blind to the powers of dehumanization. As a consequence, Gayraud Wilmore sees the source of Black Theology in three dimensions:

1. The existing black community.
2. The writings and papers of black ministers and public figures of the past. Just as White Theology had its Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Wesley, so Black Theology had its Nat Turner, Richard Allan, Martin Delany, Edward Blyden and W E B du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X.
3. The traditional African religions - especially the manner in which these religions were assimilated by Christianity and the process in which African theologians attempted to make the Christian faith indigenous and relevant to

Africa. Because, says he: 'Black people are not only a spiritual people - they are also an African people' (Wilmore, 1973, 289-303).

Here it is obvious that the same sources are not regarded by all as being the origin of Black Theology. James Cone actually took exception to Wilmore not mentioning Scripture as the source of Black Theology. But in this connection it can be stated that Wilmore, as a Christian theologian, took the Scriptural base for granted.

For Cone, the theologian must interpret faith so that it will ensure continuity and relevance for those who practise it:

'If the oppressed are to preserve their personhood, they must create a new way of looking at history, independent of the perspective of the oppressor. Black Theology is survival theology, because it seeks to provide the theological dimensions of the struggle for black identity' (Cone 1969, 37).

IV

Let us now take a closer look at some of the views of Black Theologians.

J DEOTIS ROBERTS

He occupies himself with two questions: Why a Black Theology? and How does Black Theology differ from any other theology? His answer is twofold:

- * There is a need to re-evaluate the future (destiny) of black people in the light of their own personal spiritual experience.
- * Because it addresses the personal experience of black people from a position of suffering and oppression.

JAMES HAL CONE: God is the Great Liberator

Black Theology must begin with the norm which relates to the state of black people to that which existed in the Biblical tradition. The situation of blacks is one of oppression in a white racist community, therefore he wants to know what God has to say about this situation - or what He does about it. But the norm must be based on the black community's experience of Jesus Christ - because black liberation has no meaning outside the Christian perspective. The 'white' Christ must therefore be overthrown and replaced by a 'black Messiah'.

JOSEPH A JOHNSON, Jr

As a liberator, Jesus is the power, love and wisdom of God. His point of departure is the apostle Paul's mystical experience with God, who gave him the power to lead a free and righteous life. Johnson argues further that Christ was too often identified with oppressive structures by white theologians in America. Hence the struggling, via black consciousness, for a black Messiah. Therefore, blacks must 'detheologise' their thoughts to recapture the essential humanity of Christ.

WILLIAM JONES

Theology must first ask the question: Is God a white racist? To this question the answer is NO! This non-racism of God must then become the point of departure for Black Theology.

JOSEPH R WASHINGTON, Jr

He says that Blacks are the 'suffering servants' and 'the chosen people' of God, therefore they must bear witness of his humanity - and together with this goes the liberation from suffering.

Different though the above viewpoints may seem, there are aspects which most black and liberation theologians hold in common. One aspect is the-reference to the Exodus-event as a central motif in their theologies. Another is the conflict between faith and suffering, namely the problem of evil (redemptive suffering). To this point we will return later. And thirdly, the black religious experience of everyday life which came out of their encounter with white controlled socio-political structures. In South Africa these same themes also created a new consciousness - theologically as well as politically.

V

As is well-known, Black Theology was 'imported' into South Africa through the University Christian Movement led by Basil Moore, a Protestant minister, and Colin Collins, a Catholic priest. They saw in the American intellectual movement obvious possibilities of application to South Africa.

In 1972 the first seminar was held at Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, organized by the Rev Sabelo Ntwasa. The papers which were read at the conference were later published as *Essays on Black Theology*, and after the book's banning, reappeared in the USA as *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*. Eight years went by since the second conference in Lesotho during 1975, before another conference was held in 1983 at Wilgespruit, called *Black Theology Revisited*. Of this conference the organizers noted that a definite shift took place from Black Consciousness toward a more non-racial position, subscribing to the Freedom Charter.

'However, Mokgethi Motlhabi is right when he says that:

From the very beginning Black Theology in South Africa was seen to stand with one leg in Africa and the other in Black America' (*Revisited*, 13).

He states further that although there were 'civilizing' activities amongst the early missionaries, they managed to distort the African culture and traditions to the point of making the African

'... ashamed of himself and his heritage by regarding everything African as "uncivilized" and "savage" ... and African beliefs as "superstition" (*Revisited*, 13).

Another writer amplified this, saying that:

'.. colonialism is never satisfied with having the native in its grip; by some strange logic, it turns to his past and disfigures and distorts it. Hence the history of the black man in this country is the most disappointing history to read about. It is merely presented as a long lamentation of repeated defeats. The Xhosas were thieves who went to war for stolen property. The Boers

never provoked the Xhosas, but merely went on "expeditions" to teach the thieves a lesson ... Not only is there no objectivity in the history taught us, but frequently there is an appalling misrepresentation of facts that is sickening even to the uninformed student (Revisited, 24).

The task of Black Theology in South Africa was then also to discover and retrieve African religious expression which was compatible with Christian theology, to give meaningful form to black people's Christian convictions. As such the

'... discovery and exposition of such traditional practices and their successful relation to Christian teaching would show that traditional beliefs are not necessarily incompatible with Christianity, but are in fact "latent" Christianity, so to say, if only because they are not mutually contradictory with it' (Revisited, 14).

Black South Africans also realized that the situation addressed by Black Theology in the USA was more or less the same as in South Africa. In both cases black people were the oppressed group. The message of Black Theology, namely liberation, addressed both situations:

'It recognized that blacks needed to be liberated not only from socio-political bondage ... (but also) ... from religious enslavement to "heretical" churches which fashioned the Christian teaching according to their human inclinations and socio-political interests' (Revisited, 15).

As such Black Theology

'... wanted to serve as a challenge to the conscience of the church for the benefit of genuine Christian love in the struggle for justice.' (Revisited, 15.)

This was why some saw Black Theology in South Africa in particular as

'... reaction against a kind of theology that never had the inherent possibility of communication, because it never reflected the situation of the black man. It was a white-orientated monologue' (Durand 1975, 1).

For Manas Buthelezi, the most prominent Black Theologian during the 70's, Black Theology

'... is an attempt on the part of the black theologians to define the Gospel in a way that helps to repair the damage inflicted by apartheid. The Gospel so defined then says to black people: "You too, black as you are, and even though poor and feeling powerless, were created in the image of God for a higher destiny than what you experience. Do not despair, take courage in the liberating Gospel of Christ. Take your own good initiatives. Do not hate the white man simply because you believe he has rejected you. Come on, be creative. Have your own black love that can exist and survive irrespective of the existence or non-demonstration of white love" '(Pro Veritate: 1975, 5).

Black Theology in South Africa, though rejecting most of 'white theology's' interpretation of the Gospel, was thus unlike its American counterpart (especially Cone), who rejected all white people as evil. It also invited white theologians and

Christians to join it in fellowship against oppression and injustice. Reconciliation and liberation in black theological perspective meant that whites also needed liberation from their bondage to apartheid (Boesak, Tutu, Buthelezi, etc).

Finally one needs to take note of the divisions which David Bosch made in connection with Black Theology in South Africa (Revisited, 17). These five trends were:

1. Those who followed the American model of Black Theology, with its emphasis on contextualization, addressing 'bread and butter issues of the liberation struggle'.
2. Those who equate Black Theology with African Theology in a Southern African context.
3. The third trend views Black Theology in relation to African traditional religions.
4. Those who believe that Black Theology '... found its earliest expressions in the African Independent Churches and their theological causes, leading to their secessions from the missionary churches.'
5. The fifth trend views Black Theology in South Africa as standing '... midway between African Theology and American Theology, thus forming a bridge between them '(Revisited, 18f).

About these views held by David Bosch, Mokgethi Motlhabi writes that they were identified at a very early stage, and that some of these trends have for instance already merged with each other. Also that Black theologians do recognize the need to integrate with each other. He continues, however, saying that

'In fairness to Bosch, he does make some concession that "it seems as though in South Africa the two theological trends of Black Theology and African Theology can indeed merge into a meaningful symbiosis" '(Revisited, 19).

VI

I believe, however, that any contextualized theology, be it Black, Feminist or Liberation Theology, can inclusively be described as a Theology or Hermeneutic of Suffering. Suffering need not be politically oppressive, though in South Africa we see that it has been. The centrality of Jesus, for instance, in the Gospels, and its message of salvation for the people, can only sensibly and reasonably be used in our lives if He is 'experienced' as a liberating answer to our real life problems. In our present experience of suffering, God must be brought to speak in a meaningful way. Otherwise it becomes irrelevant for our everyday and deepest humanly lived experience.

In South Africa we soon found that people suffer not only because they are Christians, but also because they are black (or female or marginalized). In this sense suffering has been distorted in the name of religion, and as such Black and Liberation Theology call for a movement away from the passive acceptance of

suffering as 'spiritual' destiny. The hermeneutic task is to strip the distorted religious and political myths surrounding suffering toward a more constructive view of suffering in the life of black people.

For the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized and the political sufferers, Christ becomes Liberator in their lived experience. Jesus is the one who now opens the future for them, even to the extent of becoming the political Messiah. This kind of messianic expectation grows out of black people's continuous conflict with the powers of *apartheid*. On the other hand, it is also an eschatological dimension of 'hope against hope' in situations of 'no hope' (Russell, 1987).

Black Theology is a way in which black people try to come to historical responsibility while they come to grips with the possibilities they themselves possess, by taking charge themselves to realize their goal. For blacks it is a search for their identity, and through the symbols in their spiritual life they seek those elements which relate to liberation.

The realization of this goal for blacks in South Africa is framed in their efforts for liberation to justice and equality. Here the political nature of hermeneutics has the task to bring us in touch with others in society. The lived situation of a person or society must be brought to consciousness and with it a reflection on pastness as it comes to the fore in the present toward the future.

Within the contextual experience of blacks in South Africa, a theology of suffering must attempt to develop a creative paradigm of dwelling which emerges from the experience of everyday life. Unlike the exclusiveness of Afrikaner history and being as a *volk*, the narrative of black suffering should open the way for a more encompassing wholeness of human dwelling. A radical break is called for from the Afrikaners' historical awareness of blacks.

As a hermeneutic of suffering, Black Theology merely says that we are the ones who are affected by politically inflicted suffering. As such, through our lived experience in this world, only we can make those 'first order' interpretations of our socio-political biography. Because of the liberating search for identity against the alienation of an oppressive Afrikaner-orientated world, black people make these 'first order' interpretations through their own stories of suffering. I believe Black Theology tells such a suffering story, and as such, suffering inflicted by political oppression can never be accepted as salvific suffering. Such spiritual interpretations come to blacks who are suffering through the pious theological excuses of those who dominate and inflict such suffering. To accept this would be both theologically irresponsible and politically disastrous.

However, and this is the creative paradox in Black and Liberation Theology, from the side of the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized alone, an authentic understanding of suffering could be both redemptive and politically creative. This paradox makes for the ambiguity of the faith of a suffering people. Redemptive power, in this sense, is generated by the oppressed for themselves, and for the salvation of those who inflict suffering.

The imposed suffering of black people in South Africa can be seen in the context of suffering for the faith. In their struggle for liberation, it is suffering for justice, righteousness and freedom. It is the kind of 'alien suffering' Karl Barth referred to as thrust upon Christ (CD IV/3, 357). Blacks take upon themselves involuntarily inflicted political suffering. Black Theology reminds us thereof, because it tries to make some sense of this suffering. Therefore it speaks out of political oppression and injustice. God saves the oppressed for the sake of the oppressors, because oppression and injustice dehumanize both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Black Theology encourages us not to endure our suffering experience with resignation, but as Manas Buthelezi says: '... as a step towards liberation'.

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