

BLACK POWER AND BLACK THEOLOGY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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I feel greatly honoured to have been invited by the organizers of this symposium to read a paper on "Black Power and Black Theology in Southern Africa." I am well aware of the fact that this is a controversial and often misunderstood topic, which invokes deep and strong reactions from many quarters. My task today will be one of giving you some information, which would help you to enter into a dialogue and come to terms with both Black Power and Black Theology.

I

Under normal circumstances, we really should not be talking about Black Power and Black Theology. But in South Africa, we cannot avoid talking about Black humanity and White humanity, for we live in a polarised and conflict-ridden situation of utter divisions of human beings into classes, racial and cultural groupings with a potential for mutual destruction. Here, previously under the British colonial rule and presently under the system of Apartheid, humanity is thrown into a situation in which one racial group is politically powerful while the other is powerless, one racial group dominates and it alone decides for all the others. In real South Africa we have to do with a situation in which the colour of one's skin plays a decisive role, because "blackness" or "whiteness" carries enormous economic and sociopolitical values, each determining one's place in society and what quality of life is open to one. That is, on the basis of racial and cultural identity one is assigned some sociopolitical value on the basis of which it is determined whether one is justified or not to enjoy certain economic, cultural and political rights and privileges as well as good medical care and educational facilities; to live in this or that particular area or neighbourhood; and to live a certain life-style of affluence in the cities or to be relegated to a life of poverty and insecurity in some barren, remote homeland. That is, it is on the basis of one's colour of the skin that it is determined by official policy where a person may or may not live, may or may not work, what bus or train one may or may not use; by the same policy it is determined whether one may or may not attend this school or university, and what Church one may or may not belong to. In South Africa then, we are not just people in general, because it makes a fundamental difference whether one

is Black or White. And for this reason we are bound to talk also about White or Black power.

Or, to look at our situation from another angle, one can say that to talk about real and concrete South Africa from the point of view of Black people, is to talk about "White power structure", which has organized society in such a way that one racial group is favoured at the expense of the other groups. We have to do here with a White power which has ordered society in such a way that Whites will be provided with absolute security, while Blacks are relegated to the position of powerlessness, dependency, and deprivation. Allan Boesak has, with insight, noted that, for Blacks, White power structure:

"... represents the economic, political, cultural, religious and psychological forces which confine the realities of black existence. Concretely, for Black South Africans the white power structure is manifested in *Apartheid*. Whatever grandiloquent ideal this ideology may represent for white people, for blacks it means bad housing, being underpaid, pass laws, influx control, migrant labour, group areas, white bosses and black informers, condescension and paternalism; in a word black powerlessness.... The white power structure represents full control of whites over the instruments of power and over the major resources of the country." (*Farewell to Innocence*, p 57).

Of course one may take issue with Boesak's portrayal of White power structure as manifested through the system of Apartheid by arguing that it is full of exaggerations. But one cannot deny the fact that Black people in South Africa have been subjected to and continue to suffer oppression and various forms of deprivation, which stretch from the first encounter between Whites and Blacks to the present time. Under the Apartheid political dispensation, racial domination has merely been perfected and made more effective. To be born Black is to be doomed to a life of second-class citizenship and to receive a third-rate education, if one receives any at all. To be Black under the White power structure means to be classified as a "non-white", a "non-person", that is, less than White and therefore not good enough to be human. And if you should add to this the fact that the concept "black" has always had bad connotations in most of the western religious world, where, in churches, it is taught that Jesus washes our hearts whiter than snow while sin and evil *blackens* our hearts, where blackness is a sign of sadness, of something bad and unwanted, you immediately realize that to exist as a Black person in a world dominated by white values,

creates all sorts of problems. It does not take much for one to begin feeling that "blackness" spells shame, connotes something less than human, and that it implies that one is inferior. Accordingly, Blacks often found it extremely difficult to accept themselves as persons in a world in which "whiteness" symbolizes what is good, and even Jesus the Saviour is portrayed as a White male.

II

It is against this background of White power structure in which Blacks felt themselves humiliated, dehumanized and negated as persons, and were considered inherently inferior that the cries of Black Power and Black Theology arose. Black Power is therefore the answer to the White power structure, the answer to White racism which inflicted pain, frustrations, humiliation and degradation on the people of colour.

Black power means Blacks are no longer prepared to have their humanity defined and limited by White power structures. Black power means that Blacks have come to realize that there is nothing to be ashamed of simply because they happen to have black skins. It means Blacks have now come around to accept themselves without apologies as a people; it means positive affirmation of what one is as a Black person and to affirm that "blackness" is not only a legitimate form of human existence authorized by God the Creator of all human beings, but above all it is to affirm that to be *Black is to be Beautiful*, and that "blackness" is something one should feel good and proud about. And this affirmation of "blackness" as something good and a legitimate form of human existence in a world dominated by "whiteness", a world in which Blacks are taught from childhood and through textbooks at school that to be black is to be a "non-white" and something inferior which is less than "white", amounts to a total conversion and experience of re-birth on the part of Black people, as Boesak rightly points out. For this involves the emergence of a new state of mind, which makes it possible for one to affirm boldly one is a person in one's own right and therefore has the right to determine one's destiny.

To illustrate our point, namely that Black Power is a result and an inevitable response to White power structure, which condemns all people of colour to a life of repression, domination, fear, dehumanization and humiliation, it is important to note that although Black Power and Black Theology, as a conscious and systematic reflection in the light of Black experience, were popularized in the late 60's and early 70's, they are not in

themselves new concepts. Indeed Black Power, and in an important sense Black Theology, surfaced at the turn of the 19th century when Blacks in the Cape colony, after a long struggle against White racism, colonial domination and oppression, broke away from White establishment in order to form Black institutions which would defend and advance their political rights and privileges.

As part of this Black attempt to liberate themselves from White domination and paternalism, Nehemiah Tile broke ties with the Methodist Church to form the Thembuland National Church between 1883 and 1891. Similarly, Mokone broke away from the Methodist Church in 1892 for racial and political reasons to form the Ethiopian Church. These are but a few examples of many other revolts flowing out of a growing Black rejection of White power structures, a rejection which reached its flowering stage in the 20th century. Underlying this Black struggle for freedom from White domination Black Power was at work. It was given impetus in 1910 when the constitution of the Union of South Africa failed to extend political franchise to Blacks. In response to this Blacks concluded that the only way to oppose White Power was to create their own Black Power organization which would work hard for political rights of Blacks through negotiation and dialogue. This gave birth to the African National Congress in 1912, which resisted White Power through dialogue, non-violence campaigns without any tangible results until it was banned together with Pan African Congress in 1960.

The banning of those two institutional expressions of Black Power and Black resistance to White Power, created a temporary lull and vacuum in Black politics and distorted the dynamics of the South African politics, for it gave the impression that Black Power never existed as a force to be reckoned with in South Africa. Furthermore it gave a wrong impression that the Black protest, which in the late 60's and early 70's became vocal in its rejection of the White politics of domination and the homelands policy, was something so new that its causes could be laid at the door of outside instigators. (There is a strong opinion among Whites that Black Power and Black Theology were importations from America; as if Blacks in South Africa needed to be told by some outsiders that they were dominated and oppressed as a people.)

What really happened with the banning of Black resistance, manifested through the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress, was that the Black community was left without leadership. So it was inevitable that time would elapse before the

Black community would re-organize itself and continue its struggle against White power structures. Accordingly, it was not altogether unexpected that a new leadership would emerge through the formation of the South African Student Organization (SASO) in 1969 to continue the Black struggle against White power where the banned organizations had left off. The difference lay in the fact that this new generation of Black leaders was largely urban and were the product of the policy of separate development on all levels and predictably opted for a policy of polarization as a necessary strategy to build up Black leadership which would negotiate from the position of strength and equality with their White counterparts to fashion a new South Africa in which the worth and dignity of persons would no longer be determined by the colour of their skins.

SASO and its leadership realized that the biggest stumbling block towards the attainment of freedom for Blacks lay in the attitudes and mental slavery of the oppressed Blacks themselves. After many years of manipulation and control by the oppressors, this makes it difficult for Blacks to feel positive and proud of themselves and to believe in their ability and power to transform their environment. They also find it difficult to believe that they have the right to define both history and their present situation and, therefore, that they have the right to wrest control of the instruments which regulate their way of life from their oppressors such as the white parliament. Indeed, they often feel so inferior as a result of colour prejudice that they could not negotiate with Whites as equals. In order to change all these things, SASO propounded a philosophy of Black consciousness with the aim to liberate Blacks first from their self-incurred mental and psychological bondage, to make Blacks aware whom they are as a people and what their position is in society. It wants to make Blacks aware that they are not poor, powerless, dominated and oppressed by accident but that they are made powerless and dependent by another group of people and that their situation is maintained by White power structure by various methods and techniques. It wants to conscientize Blacks into realizing that the present sociopolitical and economic conditions of Black people are determined by the colour of their skin in a society that is dominated and maintained by White power structure. Accordingly, it reminds Blacks that they are not oppressed and made dependent and powerless because they are Zulus, Xhosas, Sothos, Vendas, Tswanas, Koolies or Hotnots, but because the White power structure has defined them as "non-Whites". It reminds Blacks that the characteristic powerlessness and the dehumanization of their conditions, flow out of the policy of Apartheid.

In response to this grave challenge and threat as well as negation of Black humanity, Black consciousness called Blacks back to their manhood by encouraging them to reject White value systems that promote the negation of the humanity of the people of colour by seeking to make them perpetual foreigners in the land of their birth and by denying them the opportunity to become subjects of their own history and destiny. In contrast to this possibility, Black consciousness challenges Blacks to create their own value system, to define whom they are as a people, to spell out the terms for reconciliation with Whites, to press for their legitimate goals and aspirations, and to use the power they wield as a group both politically and economically to transform their condition of powerlessness into a creative and positive power which the White power structure must reckon and deal with on equal terms. Viewed in this way Black Consciousness, as a philosophical outlook and critique of White power structure and a force to galvanize Blacks into a resistant power group aiming at transforming the existing oppressive structures of Apartheid, is an integral part and sophisticated extension of Black Power manifesting Black resistance to White racial domination stretching from the colonial times to the present. To summarize: Black Power had to arise as the only possible reaction and response to White racism and White Power, beginning from a sense of being abused, leading toward rational and organized programs and activities - all of which aim at the transformation of the Black condition of powerlessness through Black Power, firmly declaring that Blacks must do their thing and determining what means they are to employ in order to reach their goal of liberation, as Blacks work for their self-affirmation, self-respect, dignity and pride, and participation and control of political instruments that will shape their human destiny.

III

The emergence of Black Power or Black Consciousness, as Blacks would prefer to call it, as an articulated and sophisticated form of Black resistance to White power structure, created a new theological climate in South Africa, a climate that swept through many churches with a largely black membership. Indeed, in a racial society in which the attempt is often made to use the Bible to justify colonial domination and repression of one racial group by another, it was only natural that the oppressed Black Christians, reflecting on their situation in the light of the gospel, would reject current White expressions of Christianity and affirm their humanity, thus turning the gospel into an instrument for resisting the extreme demands of racial oppression.

In doing this, Black Christians gave birth to what is commonly referred to as Black Theology, which seeks to interpret their oppressive conditions in the light of the biblical witness to a God whose justice requires that the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden be set free. Black Theology thus drawing its inspiration from the biblical witness to a God who freed slaves from the clutches of an oppressive Pharaoh, is a response to White Theology which sanctifies racist social institutions. Black Theology is a passionate call for freedom for all the people of God; it invites human existence beyond the oppressive structures to a future society in which all people will be free from all forms of oppressions, be they spiritual, physical, racial, political or economic. Black Theology tries to relate the Black experience of dehumanization to the Christian belief in a God of love, asking questions such as: Why did God make me Black? Why does the God of love allow Black children, whom the Creator loves, to suffer so much injustice at the hands of White children whom God also loves, if God has created us all and loves us all? Is God perhaps against Black people? How does one believe in a Saviour who is portrayed as White in a situation in which White people are experienced as a threat to Black humanity? What does it mean to love one's neighbour who is White if Whites continue as a group to humiliate Blacks and drive them away from places in which they have been born; when a White government says Black families must be separated and not live together in the cities? What does God say and do when police harrass Blacks for petty pass offences in the maintenance of White power structure?

In an attempt to come to terms with these existential problems that Black Christians face in their daily lives, Black Theology soon realized that it could not do theology as usual - dealing with problems of Western theology which are irrelevant to Black experience, such as the virgin birth of Christ, the nature of God and his perfections, problems of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, etc, however interesting they might be in themselves. Rather, Black Theology tries to demonstrate that the Christian God is not a sectarian God as White Christians have made him to be. It tries to show that God has authorized Black existence as a legitimate form of human existence, and therefore that God loves them and has created them in his image and has given them full authority to have dominion over their created selves and over their environment. It tries to show that God has not authorized the enslavement and domination of Blacks by Whites, because the biblical God is one who wills freedom for the underdogs and is therefore essentially the God of liberation. It is for this reason that the God of the bibli=

cal tradition is portrayed as one who is involved in the struggles of the oppressed to break down the chains that keep them in bondage - both spiritual and physical. God is one who takes sides and champions the cause of the poor against their oppressors. Translated into our situation, it means that the God of the biblical tradition is the God who is likely to side with Blacks against the White power structures. Accordingly, Black theology hopes to convince Blacks that their struggle for freedom from political bondage is not contrary to God's will, who wills that all people be free and be the subject of their history and destiny under and alongside their God. In short, Black Theology is a theology of liberation *par excellence* which issues a passionate call for all people to be free. To be sure, Black Theology is addressed to the oppressed Black people, but it hopes that Whites too will hear its message and therefore be saved and liberated from their tendency to oppress, so that they could become reconciled to their fellows as free selves.

IV

Churches in South Africa, especially those which constitute the South African Council of Churches with predominantly Black membership as well as Black sections of the Dutch Reformed family, could not escape the impact and message of Black Theology, a message theologically so deeply grounded on biblical witness, if they were still to remain faithful to the gospel which proclaims God's love, fatherhood and justification by grace alone for all people. They accepted the challenge of Black Theology and promoted it at different levels, despite the threats and fulminations from our government and White theologians who try, through commissions and theological writings, to call into question the integrity of Black theologians, by trying to label it a "pseudo-gospel" unsuited for South Africa or by condemning it as revolutionary and communist-inspired.

Fortunately, it is not for me to debate whether the government's view that Black Theology is unsuited for South African people is a correct one or not. However, the fact of the matter is that Black Theology has been embraced by Blacks in this country as *the only theology* that makes sense because it addresses itself to the situation which they regard as basically unjust and discriminatory in order to transform it into a more just and humane one for all South Africans, be they White or Black. And the fact that Black Theology has been embraced by the majority of Christians who are members of the South African Council of Churches as well as Black Reformed churches, means that its influence is rather extensive, and therefore makes it a factor

to be reckoned with because, whether we like it or not, Black Theology is here to stay, and will continue to make its voice heard. This leads me to my last point.

Part of my brief was to make a few comments about the future role of Black Theology, perhaps beyond the present polarised situation in which we find ourselves as Blacks and Whites. The best way of answering any question as to whether Black Theology is a passing fad or has any future at all to play, is to look at what is meant by "blackness". Black theologians have used this concept in a twofold sense: it can be understood ontologically or symbolically, that is situationally. In its ontological sense, the concept "black" literally refers to certain people who happen to have black skins, who through the years have been enslaved, colonized and dominated by people whose skins happen to be white. In this sense, the word black is particular and specific and its use is limited to Black people and their concerns. But in its symbolic sense, it refers to every human situation of enslavement, domination and oppression and therefore to the situation of deprivation, powerlessness and of being the underdogs who suffer injustice at the hands of the powerful and the ruling elite. Understood symbolically or situationally, then concept "black" has a wider and universal meaning, because it connotes every situation of human deprivation, suffering, exploitation and oppression. Here people who suffer and are thus referred to as "black" may happen to have black skins, as it has been the case historically in South Africa and North America. But it may very well happen that people who have white skins may actually also suffer injustices at the hands of the exploiters and the oppressors. Such suffering people are understood in Black Theology to be "black", because their fate is similar to the historic experience of all the people of colour who lived under the situation of enslavement and domination. It is in this latter sense that it is often said that "blackness" is rather much more a question of the attitude of the mind, an awareness that one is not poor, oppressed and deprived by accident or by chance but one is *made* poor, oppressed and deprived by other people who happen to be oppressors, exploiters and the ruling elite. And everyone who shares this attitude or awareness and joins the struggle in solidarity with the oppressed people against oppression and domination is, according to Black Theology, "black". For the issue in the struggle here is one of a situation of oppression rather than the colour of the skin, because as we have indicated already the problem of oppression as such and the colour of one's skin may or may not coincide.

In the light of this universal meaning of the word "black", it is fair to argue that Black Theology as theology of liberation is not only here to stay, but has an important role to play in South Africa in the future after the problem of racial oppression is long solved. As we are all aware, because of sin and human limitation and propensity towards evil, making it unlikely that human beings can ever hope to create a perfect state of justice in such a way that we can claim that any future transformed society will be totally free from violating the dignity and personal freedom of all its members, it seems obvious that Black Theology of liberation worth the name must have a role to play in any future South African society. For there will always be elements in the society who, for a variety of reasons, will feel themselves deprived, somehow oppressed and therefore in need of liberation, be it political, economic or socio-cultural. And to be true to itself, Black Theology will keep calling the society's attention to the injustices and oppression prevailing at the time in order to challenge all those who are involved in those oppressive structures to move towards a greater creativity and transformation of the social institutions so that freedom, dignity and human rights may be accorded to all its members. To summarize: because of sin and human imperfection in anything we do, there will always be some forms of oppression and injustice in human society, which will call for Christian action in restructuring their social relationships so that they might approximate the ideal of the perfect justice and righteousness that shall arrive with God's coming Kingdom. It will remain the function of liberation of theology to inspire and equip Christians into becoming agents for the transformation of sinful and unjust social institutions so that they could best serve human rights and liberation.

Finally, in view of the present and future role that Black Theology seems to have in the transforming of any unjust and oppressive social structures, I wish to appeal to you to listen and be open to the cries of your fellow Black Christians. For it is when you are prepared to do that that some dialogue and reconciliation will be possible, the reconciliation which will make the creation of a new and just South Africa for all its people an exciting project. My appeal is based on the awareness that a future South Africa in which a person no longer will be determined by the colour of his skin, will not come about without the full contribution of Black Power and Black Theology. Therefore, the sooner Whites listen to the voice of prophecy from the Black Christians, the easier will be the transition for both Blacks and Whites toward that new South Africa. For it is through listening to one another that a possibility of mutual

dialogue and correction will come about, both of which will lead to some form of consensus and reconciliation between our currently diverse perceptions about the future that each side thinks desirable for all of us. In my opinion, it is as we move in this direction that any meaningful future worth talking about is conceivable for any of us, and anything *less* than an honest confrontation and dialogue between Black and White worlds, so as to bring reconciliation between them, is a sure way of guaranteeing a loss of any future for all of us.

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R E S P O N S E - *John W de Gruchy*

My overall response to Professor Maimela's thought-provoking and challenging address is positive. In responding I will highlight what I regard as the most significant aspects of his paper for us in South Africa today.

PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY

The church in South Africa today is not simply divided into different denominations or by varying confessional differences. It is perhaps far more the case that Christians, and the churches, are divided by different ways of perceiving the socio-political realities of our society. This is not only a cause of division between different denominations but also, and often more so, within them. It is especially the case where denominations include various race groups. At the risk of generalising and oversimplifying it seems true to say that the majority of Whites perceive things differently from the majority of Blacks. Part of the value of Professor Maimela's paper is that it enables those of us who are white to see how many black Christians and theologians perceive the situation in which we all live, and to discover why black consciousness, black power, and black theology emerged. Within the white community these are generally regarded as things to be rejected out of hand without any further thought. But within the black community they are regarded as restoring dignity, awakening hope, and relating black experience and expectation to Christian faith.

THE CHURCH IS A MAJORITY BLACK CHURCH

Those of us who are white generally perceive the church in South Africa as a white institution which has black members. However, when we simply consider the statistics it immediately becomes apparent that the church in South Africa, taken as a whole, is far more black than white in its membership. Of course, there are denominations which only include Whites, and there are multi-racial denominations with a minority of Blacks. But most of the mainline churches (e.g. Anglican, Catholic, Methodist) have by far a majority of black members. Then, of course, there are churches which are only comprised of Blacks. We could say, then, that the church in South Africa is black - with some white members! Statistically that would be more accurate. It is very important for white Christians to realise and come to terms with this fact. It does not mean that those of us who are white no longer have a place in the church, or must escape into an all-white church environment. It means that we have to come to a better understanding of what the majority of Christians in our country think, feel and are saying, for the sake of the future of the church and the Christian faith. It is of great importance that black Christians regard their Christian faith and church membership as something which relates directly to their experience and not something imposed upon them by an European culture; and it is of great importance that white Christians do not reject this, but that we understand, encourage, and learn from it. European culture and Christian faith are not synonymous.

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

Professor Maimela found it impossible to discuss black theology except in the context of the black struggle for dignity, political rights and power. Many people shrink from this relating of faith, theology and politics. This is understandable especially when, in the past, the church has tried to control society and take over the task of government. The Protestant Reformation was, in part, an attempt to break this secular pretension and power of the church, and, thereby to enable the church to be the church in society. But this did not mean that the church had thereby relinquished its social responsibility, though many have assumed this is what the separation of church and state means. On the contrary, the church cannot escape its socio-political responsibility without denying the gospel. Politics is about people - how our lives are ordered in society. It is about human relations, human dignity, justice, peace and so forth. All of these relate directly to Christian faith and

the task of the church. This does not mean that the church must support a particular political party or become one itself. It means that the church has to say what the gospel means within the political life of our country. So Maimela has shown how black theology seeks to relate Christian faith to the political aspirations and struggles of black people. This is how it must always be if Christian faith is to be meaningful for our lives within the world, not just in a private sense, but for our lives together.

THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

Doing theology in South Africa today is a very challenging, but also a very exciting task. Indeed, I find it far more so here than most other places where I have studied and taught. One of the reasons for this is that theology here relates so directly to the issues facing all of us. This is largely because of what I mentioned earlier. Even though Whites and Blacks are politically divided, they share in large measure a common faith, and this forces us all to think theologically about the issues which confront us. Related to this is the fact that here in South Africa we have a convergence of several theological traditions. On the one hand, we have the Western European theological tradition, in all its confessional variety, and on the other we have the vibrant theologies which have emerged within the African context and our own country. Black theology forces those who come out of the white Western theological mould to re-think, re-evaluate, and re-state the Christian faith for our time and place. This may seem very threatening to some who like to cling to past tradition, but it is vitally important for the future life and witness of the church in our country.

A CRITICAL COMMENT - FOR US ALL

One of the major criticisms of black theology has been the charge that it is doing in reverse what "white theology" has done in the past. This is a critical question that must continually be raised - to what extent is black theology deriving its theology from culture rather than the Christian tradition? Having said that, it must immediately be pointed out that black theology, like any other theology, cannot exist except in a dynamic relation to black culture. This has always been true of any theology that has been relevant, and Whites cannot avoid the criticism that much of white Christianity is syncretistic. But the problem remains for us all to ensure that theology does not become captive to culture but rather serves it on the basis

of the gospel. Maimela is well aware of this problem and the need to counter it. Indeed, part of the significance of his paper is to force us all to see whether our own version of Christianity has not become culture-bound. It is only in the process of dialogue between white and black Christians that this danger can be overcome on both sides, better enabling the church to fulfil its responsibility in our society.

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