

BLACK THEOLOGY - A PERSONAL OPINION

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THE EMERGENCE of Black Theology with its doctrine of the “total” liberation of the Black man has become one of the most controversial subjects affecting him in present-day South Africa. This has been the case since the 1969 call by the five Catholic priests for the Africanisation of the church in our country and the recognition of the Black clergy; and since the proclamation by the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO) of the need for a Black Consciousness and Black Identity. This Black Liberation move and the means towards its achievement is seen from the same perspective by both the “Black Theologian” and the Black student. I find the distinction, therefore, which makes Black Consciousness a “secular” movement and Black Theology a “religious” movement - despite their genus-species relationship - to be most unfortunate.

Perhaps the sole purpose of this distinction is to indicate merely a point of view, so that while the end in view is for both movements fundamentally the same, the theologian’s approach towards its realisation is slightly different from that of the philosopher, the social scientist or the politician, depending on their respective points of emphasis.

Notwithstanding this, the distinction gives the unfortunate impression of still maintaining a dualistic view of the world. According to this view the world is divided into the spiritual and the material worlds, the former being sacred and the latter profane. To the profane world belongs secular society and to the sacred the Church, as the high caste. The church is regarded as being in the world but not belonging to it. Thus it seeks the conversion of the world in the sense not of helping it to strive for perfection within itself, but (in the sense) of denying itself (as if regretting its being), of abstracting and projecting itself towards some kind of ideal perfection which always remains for it an eschatological mystery. This is a kind of envy expected on the part of the world which does nothing to help it towards self-fulfilment but only hastens its self-destruction. More emphasis on this kind of perfection, divorced from the daily experiences in life and doing nothing to improve the life situation (which it is that needs perfection), seems to me to obstruct the effectiveness of the church’s mission and to retard or utterly obscure the understanding of the scriptures.

One of the essential characteristics of this world of ours is that it is duly in the process of becoming, and “becoming” is a dynamism towards the realisation of “being”, which is its perfection. Thus perfection is “happening” to the world; it is

© Mokgethi Motlhabi (1972): **Black Theology. A Personal Opinion.** in: Mokgethi Motlhabi (ed.) (1972): “Essays on Black Theology”. Johannesburg: Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement. ISBN 0-620-00558-0 (129 pages) pages 53 - 59.

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not extraneous to it. "Becoming", in this way, presupposes "being", so that at each stage of its becoming the word IS, but IS NOT; it IS PERFECT but IS NOT PERFECT. It is thus always in the process of becoming itself: it HAPPENS to itself. In this process the world continually becomes OTHER THAN ITSELF WITHIN ITSELF: it finds a certain fulfilment. It is, therefore, clear that perfection for the world does not mean its being extracted from its early situation into some abstract, "Christlike" one. It means Christ happening to it in its authentic, existential situation. Socially this means happening to one's self through one's environment and through other selves, and a mutual assistance of selves within society towards the happening of each individual within society and the happening of society as a whole.

It means Christ happening to man in his daily experience and his daily communication with his fellowmen. Communication, in any way, is an indication of Christ's presence and his working among men, whether we recognise him or not. Striving for communication with other men, therefore, is automatically striving for Christ. Hence Christ is the very perfection of man. He is the kind of being we are directly striving for in our Christian or any religious faith (we often speak of anonymous Christians); further, he is the being we are indirectly striving for in any other human communication. So communication among men implies a search for Christ prompted by himself; and hope in the perfection of this communication in Christ, when all men will realise their oneness in him, and their authenticity as the mystical body of Christ. The reason why we have found it expedient to speak of a Black Theology as a liberation theology has to do with the constitution of man and his nature as a communicative being. Man's present constitution is such that he is, according to Luther, in the state of "fallenness", where his "original state" of communication has been affected. In his obsession with the idea of freedom and independence, as created in God's image, man became so snatching that the soon found God to be an obstacle on his way towards "complete" freedom that is to say, being only the image of god, man's freedom was only a reflection of God's freedom and not freedom itself, for only god is freedom by definition. He knew that as long as he recognised God he would remain in a subordinate position. On the other hand, he could not "unseat" God, for God is his very being: there can be no image without that of which it is the image. The only alternative was to expel God from his mind, and PRETEND God did not exist. In this way he "became" master of himself and master of his environment.

Thus it is that man alienated himself from God. But since god is the uniting element between man and man, alienation from God meant alienation from his fellow-men and consequently alienation from himself. This means a state of confusion, so that man continuously lives a lie in the name of truth: and he knows it. Now this was from the beginning a deliberate act on the part of man, and if it continues, it is still deliberate. If this act of alienation continues to harass other men morally, it is a crime. Since it is directed also against God, through those who are its victims, it is a Sin. Now sin is nothing but a deliberate act of alienating man from himself, his fellow-man and his God in the way indicated. Our situation in South Africa is such that we need a personal, psychological liberation from ourselves and what enslaves us; a social, political and economic liberation in relation to fellowmen, more so across the "colour-bar"; and a religious liberation in relation to god. Each of these cases implies communication. This, understood from the Black man's point of view in his situation, and the means he employs towards its realisation, is called Black Consciousness. Black Theology is its theological aspect.

The task of seeing to and fostering this communication has been entrusted to every man by virtue of his very nature as a social and communicative being. In Christian tradition it is regarded as having been entrusted to the church “pastorally”, as a community. Therefore the Church has a direct mission towards the fostering of a “human community”, which should necessarily imply Christ’s presence. Christianity must permeate through every sphere of human life and bring Christ not necessarily by word but by deed. So Christianity begins in fact in daily man-to-man communication which bit-by-bit leads man nearer-and-nearer to Christ. It should not be an abstraction, but a daily experience in which we find Christ in our fellowmen. The closer we are to our fellowmen, the closer we are to Christ. Christianity, therefore, means Christ’s presence in the world among men sacramentalised in our fellowmen.

It is for this reason that I find the kind of distinction in the treatment of the “two worlds” no longer tenable. Perhaps it may serve as matter of convenience aimed at accommodating a protagonist who might be prejudiced against a seemingly alien title: either Black consciousness or Black Theology.

Having thus examined the kind of phenomena from which man as such needs to be liberated, we are now able to go deeper into the meaning of Black Theology. It is that aspect of Black consciousness which seeks to relate god and the whole of the religious values to the Black man in his situation precisely as a “Black man” in South Africa. To be Black in our country means in the first place to be the victim of “apartheid” - to be the object of colonisation, disinheritance and exploitation. It also means, in religious circles, to be pagan, barbaric and almost damned; and all these because of the colour of one’s skin, which is not white. In Black theology the term only secondarily connotes colour, which popular white parlance prefers to call “non-white”. It denotes all the oppressed people in our country irrespective of colour (which cannot be white, of course), nationality or creed. It thus embraces all the African People, the Indians and the so-called Coloured. Black theology, therefore, seeks to relate God as both man’s creator and liberator to all these people in their entire situation, not only the religious, but also the social, the political and the economic situations. God’s word and sustenance permeates through the whole of man’s life and being by virtue of his very creation (in the image of God).

Although Black theology is a theology of liberation, it is contrasted to the traditional “salvation of the soul” theology in that it does away with all dualistic overtones which divide man from himself and concentrate on one part only. In Black Theology man is regarded as a complete whole, a mind-body-soul composite in, and confronted by, a complete situation. By liberating the Black man psychologically, Black Theology makes the black man ready to look around himself and see what it is that ails him precisely as himself, as Black. It calls for a black consciousness, for it recognises that it is because a man is black that he is oppressed.

Black Theology is not a new theology nor is it a proclamation of a new gospel. It is merely a re-evaluation of the gospel message, a making relevant of this message according to the situation of the people. It is a re-interpretation of the scriptures in the light of the existential situation of our daily black experiences. It’s advocates believe that Christ not only has something to do and offer to my “soul”, but to “me” in my entire situation and condition here and now, according to what we read in Luke 4,18: “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the down-trodden

free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour". Christ is, therefore taken almost literally when he says " ... Now he is god, not of the dead, but of the living; for in him all men are in fact alive". (Luke 20,38).

It is necessary here to make clear some of the misunderstandings which bring many people into opposition with Black Theology. These base themselves unwittingly on the word "Black", contending that theology is only one and has no colour. This is a trap one falls into when one is not prepared to listen to another's views but, being already biased, waits only for the "catching" word, that is, waits only to catch you with a word that might seem to be wrongly used, in spite of its given definition in the case. I have already stated what "Black" is taken to mean in Black Theology. Its true meaning is co-extensive with suffering, and as the suffering lot of the majority in this country is "not white", "Black" is rightly used, affirming that whiteness is not the only value in relation to which everything else should be considered. Black theology is thus theology from the viewpoint of the suffering, just as Barth writes from a Lutheran and German viewpoint or Schillebeeckx from a Roman Catholic and Dutch viewpoint. A natural persistence is that if the real meaning of "Black" in this case is suffering then why not call a spade a spade. Rhetorically the retort becomes: What is a spade by a different name? So what is important is not the name so much as its import - call it a slogan, if you like - : hence the definition of Black theology as the theology of liberation from suffering.

A further objection is that Black Theology is racist and unchristian since it does not seem to regard the white people in this country. It is therefore said to be a successful indoctrination of the South African policy of separate development. This a Beelzebubian-exorcism-kind of accusation. For these are the very bonds from which Black Theology seeks to liberate the Black man. These are the very bonds that are seen to preoccupy the mind of the black man to the effect that he can no longer even meditate on his God nor find the opportunity to offer sacrifice unhindered. When a man's mind is arrested from thinking on his God, God dies. God dies because he no longer manifests himself in the life of this man as its sole author, and, therefore, its sole director. But as a man's mind is by nature God-oriented and God-inspired; and as man's entire life and being is inconceivable without God, the death of God means for him the birth of idols. Now these may be a fabrication of man himself or what those who rule his mind present to him as "God". Where a religion is concerned this may be the result of a wrong kind of interpretation, springing from a different background and outlook from that of the people to whom it wishes to present God.

Unfortunately, this seems to have been and still remains the case in the presentation of the Christian message to the Black people in our country. No doubt, most of the gospel message still remains a foreign gospel to the indigenous people. Granted that Christianity was well adapted to western culture and values; however, very little has been done to adapt and relate the Christian tenets to the African way of life and culture. Christianity was from the very beginning brought to the black man wrapped in western culture and western values, and no distinction was drawn between the two (Christianity and western culture). Thus any black man wishing to become Christian had to embrace the whole of the western values without due analysis and understanding, and had to renounce his entire background as paganism and superstition. Such a concept being already foreign in itself to the people concerned, presented an idol for God, so that the black man still needs to be liberated from idolatry. Thus for the Black man the death of God and the birth of idols is seen as a theological perversion: the

misdirection, misinterpretation and misrepresentation of God and his gospel to the Black people in this country. No doubt this was done, by some, of course, with the best of intentions and good-will. But contributing to this already messed up gospel was the stand the hierarchy adopted in identifying itself with the State in its evil policies. Today the hierarchy proclaims by word of mouth what it seldom, if ever, practices. Most often its practices, even within the church structures, are contrary to the true gospel and not what it (the Church) says in Biblical exposition, if it says anything at all. Now it is quite clear that once confidence has been lost in the entire presentation of the church, the church can no longer speak convincingly about what it stands for. What remains, is an examination of conscience and the realisation of the need for change. This is what Black Theology sees to do.

It must be clear at this stage that all the accusations levelled against Black Theology so far are merely prejudice. Black Theology bears the concern of every Christian for the spread of the gospel, the reorientation and rehabilitation of the people of God. It must therefore also be realised that it is not denominational, in the sense of being advocated by a particular church or creed, nor does it advocate a schism from traditional churches. It is only concerned with adopting the most, and perhaps the only, realistic way of spreading the gospel for the individual and social benefit, realising the uniqueness of every situation. Thus the Transvaal Regional Seminar on Black Theology resolved that it is “ ... not a theology of absolutes but grapples with the existential situation. Black Theology is not a theology of theory, but a theology of action and development. It is not a reaction against anything - except irrelevancy - but is an authentic and positive articulation of our reflection on God in the light of our black experiences” (parenthesis mine).

The resolution concludes, “As a consequence we turn our backs on the biased interpretation of the Christian message which the white dominated churches have been feeding to the Black people. We understand Christ’s liberation to be liberation not only from circumstances of internal bondage but also liberation from circumstances of external enslavement. Christ’s message therefore, to black theology means taking resolute and decisive steps to free the black people not only from estrangement to God but also from slave mentality, inferiority complex, distrust of themselves, and continued dependence on other men culminating in self-hate.