

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS REVIEW
- Papers and Statements for Discussion -

Nyameko Pityana :
What is Black Consciousness?

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Steve BIKO, “Black consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity”; Manas BUTHELEZI, “An African Theology or A Black Theology?”; James CONE, Black Theology and Black Liberation”.

What is Black Consciousness?

- Nyameko Pityana -

BLACK PEOPLE are notoriously religious. Religion permeates all the depths of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. It must be accepted then that a study of black theology is a study of black consciousness, of self-awareness. The two themes are, in the context of the black community, intertwined. To the black people, religion is their whole system of being. It is for this reason that the church (and consequently a study of black theology) has added significance to all those who are seeking avenues of self-expression and the assertion of humanity and self-awareness. Thus, the theme of blackness is "a quest for new values and definitions that are meaningful and appropriate for black people and which give substance and significance to their lives".

The real significance of this mood, this quest for new values, is well summarised by Lenore Bennett, a prominent black American historian when he writes: "The overriding need of the moment is for us to think with our own eyes. We cannot see now, because our eyes are clouded by the concepts of white supremacy. We cannot think now, because we have no intellectual instruments save those, which were designed expressly to keep us from seeing. It is necessary for us to develop a new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts", for white concepts have succeeded in making black people feel that they are inferior; they have wiped out their past history; or they have presented it in such a way that they feel, not pride, but shame. They have successfully created the conditions that make it easy to dominate a people. The initial step towards liberation is to abandon the partial frame of deference to our oppressors, and create new concepts which will release our reality."

It has become imperative for us today to speak about BLACKNESS and CONSCIOUSNESS because of the unfortunate history of events between black and white in this country. It is a history of continuous plunder of land and cattle by the European invaders, of the devastation and decimation of people, followed by their economic enslavement. It is a story of treacherous deeds, rapacious seasons with sanctimonious hypocrisy, of "treaties" that were not treaties but a cynical legalising of plunder, or the policy of "divide and rule" carried out with systematic cunning in order to turn one group of black people against another.

It has been alleged with truth that the trade, the settler followed the skirts and shirt-cuffs of the missionary. They were agents of European imperialism. They worked hand in hand with the colonialist powers, working feverishly for the subjugation of the black people and for the extension of the territory of the imperialist power. The coming of Christianity set in motion a process of social change involving the rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up, and the framework of social norms and values by which people used to order their lives and their relationship to others. The measure of one's Christian conviction, the extent of one's love and charity was in reserving the outer signs and symbols of the European way of life: "Whether you had acquired European good manners, dressed as the European did, liked European hymns and tunes etc." (James Ngugi). The acceptance of the Christian church, the triumph of the missionary endeavour, meant the rejection of the African customs. The tribal community was split widely

asunder by encouraging Christianised subjects to violate tribal customs. They were exempt from the morals and customs of the tribe, which, in the light of the Christian morality, were condemned as immoral. It meant, in fact, the rejection of those values and rituals which held us together. European missionaries had attacked primitive rites of the people, condemned our beautiful and soulful African tribal dances, the images of our gods, recoiling from their suggestion of sensuality. The black convert did the same, often with greater zeal, for he had to prove how Christian he was through the rejection of his past and roots. In short, Christianity brought about a complex of Christian values, Western culture, politics and technology.

The coming about of Christianity brought about a real upheaval in African norms and values, a disintegration of families and tribes and the cancerous money economy. The effect was to prepare blacks, psychologically, for the onslaught that was coming from the colonials' rulers. They were dehumanised and had to accept an inferior status in the land of their birth. The early Church was never prepared to face the serious encounter with all those elements that stifled the national development and happiness of the black people.

It is a realisation of this great myth designed to rob the black man of his soul and his human dignity. It was brought about by the white settlers with the able assistance of his able handmaiden, the Church, through blood and tears, in suppression and humiliation, through dishonest means, by force and by subjugation of the sons of the soil. It is the liberating effect of this self-knowledge and awareness that we refer to as black consciousness.

I support Adam Small who, in attempting a definition of blackness, suggests that "it is not colour of the skin in terms of which we see our blackness in the first place. It is, in the first place, a certain awareness, a certain insight." He later on refers to this awareness as a phenomenon of pride and not inferiority. Ben Khoapa supports this thesis when he says: "The blackness we are talking about is not an emotional outburst - it speaks of a newly found self-love, and self affirmation." No man can love another unless he loves himself; no group can value the truth in others unless it perceives the essentials of their own truths. Khoapa goes on to define blackness in terms of "developing a black perspective". By this, he means "searching for black identity, self-awareness and self-esteem and the rejection of white stereotypes and morals. It means stopping looking at things through white eyes and beginning to look at things through black eyes".

These speakers who speak so liberally about blackness could quite easily use the S.A.S.O definition of black consciousness. To us, blackness, consciousness is an attitude of the mind, a way of life. In other words, consciousness goes a step further than just awareness, for it seeks a positive and practical exhibition of one's awareness by deeds and by action. It is a way of life - you must live and practise the fact of your consciousness in order to make it real. The S.A.S.O. policy manifesto goes on to describe black consciousness as:

- “(i) The basic tenet of black consciousness is that the black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity;
- (ii) The black man must build up his own value system, and see himself as self-defined and not as defined by others;

- (iii) The concept of black consciousness implies the awareness by the black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically, and hence group cohesion and solidarity are important facets of black consciousness.
- (iv) Black consciousness will always be enhanced by the totality of involvement of the oppressed people; hence the message of black consciousness has to be spread to reach all sections of the black community.”

Steve Biko's analysis puts flesh onto the skeleton. He suggests, "it is the most positive call to emanate from the black world for a long time. Its unadulterated quintessence is the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - 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 is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black."

Black consciousness calls for a decultured being in the black society. It means "a whole new vision, a totally different perspective, a penetration to the depths beneath the depth of blackness". (Lenore Bennett). Black consciousness implies a vision of the heritage of our forefathers. It is the beginning of a new search for roots, roots to anchor them firmly in the midst of a militant struggle. Black consciousness is not only a search for humanity but is in fact an assertion and affirmation of the worth and dignity of the black man. Black consciousness is indeed a hunger for solidarity with the oppressed people of this world. Those who "reject the definition of themselves in clichés categories of the whites when they speak of 'race relations'". The real black people are those who embrace the positive description "black" as opposed to the negatives of others who set themselves up as the standard, the criterion and the hallmark of value. It is a appositive confrontation with the self. It is black consciousness that is seeking for a social content of the lives of the black people. It seeks to involve the other in the suffering of the others. For that has been the cornerstone of the traditional black community.

Having thus defied and explained black consciousness, and having presented the unfortunate activities of the missionaries in conquest, the stage is now set for a discussion of black theology.

The need for a black theology must be seen in the context of the role of the church up to this day. The churches are still an extension of the missionary ideal. It is rooted in the white "racist" system, dominated by whites and the values of white superiority. The Church is white. It tells us "white Caesar can do no wrong"; instead of fighting against the real anti-Christ, it vigorously fights against those who are prepared to lose their lives that many might live. We have come to live with the contrasts between practice and theory - the white church whose basic doctrine is love and equality between men is still an integral part of that social force, a white baasskap on which the "South African way of life" is built, the subsequent hatred between men, and the effective subjugation of the black masses daily. Christianity is rooted in an exploitive cultural system, that is basically selfish.

Black theology, then, is an extension of black consciousness. Theology is the study of God and the relationship between man and man. Thus theology must have an existential and social content. This is what will affect the ultimate good. This will shape the values of society. The real meaning of the Church, to black people, is that it needs to be a haven where they can freely shed their tears, voice their aspirations and sorrows, present their spiritual needs, respond to the world in which they live and empty themselves to God. Traditional belief provided psychological areas where uprooted men and women find comfort, a sense of belonging together, a feeling of oneness and a recognition of being wanted and accepted. This is the true Church. This is the liberating effect of theology and a belief in the ultimate good.

The Church, as presently constituted, is still foreign to the should of the black man. He will not bring forth his love, thought-patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes, philosophical dispositions, needs, aspirations etc. The church of the people must have its roots deeply established in the history and the traditions of those who profess it. It is the black people themselves who must work out priorities in terms of their overriding aspirations. They alone can do so by reason of their emotional and intellectual involvement in the struggles and sufferings of their people.

If the church is the greatest cause of our misshapen country, black souls and culture alienation, it must in future work for the culture of liberation. It must go back to the roots of broken African civilisation. It must examine the African traditional forms of worship, forms of marriage, sacrifice and why these things were meaningful and wholesome to the traditional African community. (James Ngugi). In other words, N'gugi calls for a re-examination of the entire system of values and redefine and re-interpret history for a meaningful overhauling of the imprisoned mentality of the black people.

The awareness of this challenge motivated black students at the SASO Conference in July to pass a resolution (57/71) believing that Black Theology "is an authentic and positive articulation of the black Christian's reflection on God in the light of their experience". It understands Christ's liberation not only from circumstances of internal bondage, but also as a liberation from circumstances of external enslavement. With James Cone, we define Black Theology as "a theology of liberation". It is a theology of blackness - the affirmation of black humans that emancipates black people from white racism, and thus providing an authentic freedom for both black and white people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says NO to white oppression. Black Theology seeks to commit black people to the risks of affirming the dignity of black personhood. "We do this as men and as black Christians," writes Cone. It calls upon all black people to affirm with Elridge Cleaver: "We shall have it on the Earth. The Earth will be levelled by our efforts to gain it".

In a nutshell, then, Black Theology concerns itself with liberation, and liberation presupposes a search for humanity and for existence as a God-created being.

Black Theology then, is an awareness by black people of the failure of the white establishment to work selflessly towards the values and ethics Christianity claims to uphold. It is the consciousness by the blacks to get their house in order and work towards the realisation of their aspirations and emancipation from the entanglements of an immoral society. This is where "the twain" meet. Black consciousness is also an awareness by a particular social group of people of its own situation in the world, and the expression of it by means of a concrete image. Bot

Black Theology and Black Consciousness are instruments of construction. The real point about blackness is that it gives one a point of reference, an identity and a consciousness.

The relationship between Black Theology and Black Consciousness is that one is a genus of the other. For Black Theology then, to be real in our situation, it must say something positive and meaningful to the black people. One suggestion from James N’gugi needs to be noted: “I believe the Church could return to (or learn lessons from) the primitive communism of the early Christian church of Peter and Paul, and the communalism of the traditional African society. With this, and working in alliance with the socialist aspirations of the African masses, we can build a new society to create a new man freed from greed, competitive hatred, and ready to realise his full potential in humble co-operation with other men in a just socialist society.

In conclusion, let me suggest that Adam Small was expressing the seminal idea of Black Theology when he said to the SASO Conference in July: “We will live without apology, or as if we are apologising. Why, and to whom must we in any case, or live as if we apologise for being ourselves? We cannot apologise for being ourselves. We will live autonomously as ourselves. Anyone who thinks this is a trivial statement is either hypercritical or ignorant - for it implies that he does not know the extent to which whites have goaded or do goad us to mutilations which all add up to our believing that we live by their grace. Now we are rejecting the idea - their idea - which unfortunately has also become deeply embedded in the souls of many of us, the idea that we live even in the least by their grace. WE MAY LIVE BY THE GRACE OF GOD, BUT WE DO NOT LIVE BY THE GRACE OF THE WHITES”.

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