

CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIALISM: APPROPRIATING MOSES AND JESUS FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION IN AZANIA

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Introduction

Comrades, students of Fedsem and neighbouring institutions, non-academic and academic staff, distinguished guests, Principals of Colleges, Mr President; your invitation to me to deliver this year's anniversary lecture constitutes the most important honour bestowed on me in recent years. This is so for obvious reasons. For the sake of posterity however, let me state one of those reasons.

I love Fedsem. I embrace the principles of Christian ecumenism represented by the common theological training done at Fedsem. I value the quality of theological training that I personally received from this institution. I am committed to this form of autonomous black theological education which is open to nonblacks and yet subordinate to no nonblacks. I think I am not wrong when I say that as a matter of fact, Fedsem is the only autonomous, ecumenical, black institution of higher learning in the country. If we lose this, we lose everything we have in this regard. It is for this reason that a few of us once risked being killed or as it turned out, being imprisoned in a Christian chapel for three days rather than voluntarily participate in the forced removal of Fedsem from Alice in 1975.

What is more, the tradition of radical scholarship here seems to us, looking from the outside, to continue unabated. This probably explains why the forces of reaction and status quo maintenance in the country continue to harass and even ban some of your staff and students.

Allow me, therefore, to pay tribute at the outset of my lecture, to the history of radical and committed theological scholarship at Fedsem; to the history of politically engaged learning at Fedsem, because there is no such a thing as neutral learning. One takes political and ideological sides by what and how one learns, whether at Fedsem or at any other learning institution. For this reason, black students in South Africa have since 1976 refused to acquiesce in the politics of repression that underlie apartheid education; let me pay tribute to the commitment that used to be there — and hope still is there — to a renewal, a transformation of the church by facilitating the self activity of the oppressed masses in the churches.

Again, thank you for honouring me with this invitation. The topic

of my lecture is: Christianity and Socialism— Appropriating Moses and Jesus for national liberation in Azania.

Introduction

I have decided on this topic not least because like a student in a house of meeting, “I wish to propose progress.” The 1970s saw the coming of national independence for Mozambique and Angola in the sub-continent of Africa. The beginning of the 1980s witnessed the national independence of Zimbabwe. It looks like before the close of the 1980s we might live to see the national independence of Namibia. What is more, there are rumours of a possible negotiated settlement in Azania before long. I personally doubt that this will happen soon, quite apart from having difficulties with the whole notion of a negotiated settlement.

Be that as it may, my topic is prompted partly by what seems to me to be the need to distinguish between independence and liberation. Although it is true that there can be no liberation without independence, it is equally true that independence is not liberation. This we have seen not only in what happened in most of the Third World, including Africa, but in particular in what has happened in this sub-continent since the 1960s. In reflecting on this problem, I recall Claude Ake’s political prophecy. At the end of his insightful book on revolutionary pressures in Africa he insists that in the absence of political and moral will to establish a just and progressive economic system, Africa is marching inexorably towards fascism. This is a real prospect in a situation where there is economic stagnation. Ake asks how the desperation of the alienated and hungry masses would be contained. Allow me to quote from him at length:

By bread and circuses?” he asks further. Circuses perhaps, but not bread because this would simply not be available. But one thing that would surely be needed in ever increasing quantities in this situation would be repression. As the economic stagnation persisted, the masses would become more wretched and desperate and the contradictions would develop. Wretchedness and desperation would lead peasants to subversion, workers to industrial action and the lumpen proletariat to robbery and violence. Punitive expeditions would then be sent out to liquidate whole villages, armed robbers would be punished by public executions, and other crimes against property would be dealt with by imposing sanctions of exceptional harshness. Striking workers would be chased by police dogs, locked out, starved out, shot at. Any person or group of persons who looked like being a rallying point against the system would be summarily *liquidated*. All this is already happening. And things are likely to get worse, if only because repression demoralize the country, impedes productivity and ties up too much of the meagre surplus in

servicing coercive institutions. So we have a vicious circle promising ever more blood and sweat. It would appear that the choice for Africa is not between capitalism and socialism after all, but between socialism and barbarism" (1978:107).

If one makes exceptions of extreme cases such as those of Idi Amin in Uganda and Bokasa in Central African Republic, the truth of Ake's prophecy is still validated by the repression we have seen in the South African "Homelands" which are not even independent in the same sense as say Angola or Zimbabwe.

It is my contention that the salvation of the entire sub-continent depends on the coming of a genuine liberation in South Africa. And again, here as in other parts of the Third World, the choice is not between capitalism and socialism; it is between socialism and barbarism. If we do not go socialist we can only go barbaric, as indeed we have already begun to do.

I contend further that it is a christian question whether our liberation is socialist or capitalist. I mean of course by christianity the best of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. I do not mean what christianity has been in the West, namely the religious ideology of Western history and culture. In this country, unlike in other parts of the christian world, the issue of christianity and socialism has not been addressed. We tend to speak about christianity as if it is unproblematically monolithic. We ignore the fact that there are bourgeois forms of christianity as well as working class forms of christianity. We delude ourselves by thinking that the tension between these two conflicting streams of christianity can be resolved non-ideologically.

In this lecture I wish to defend these two contentions by arguing that the roots of a socialist politics and society are strongly established in the progressive traditions of the Bible. Consequently, I maintain that unless christians are socialists they cannot be christians. In other words the fundamental thesis of my lecture is that capitalist christianity is contrary to the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth.

Let me not waste time by multiplying the basic assertions which I adhere to in respect of christianity and capitalism. Let me get to the heart of the matter by addressing what must be the uppermost question in the minds of most of you by now. It is this: What on earth does he mean by socialism? It is correct to ask this question even before one deals with whether genuine christianity should espouse the ideals of socialist thought.

SOCIALISM

In one sense socialism must be seen as a critique of capitalism. I mean by this that we struggle for socialism because of our frustrations with capitalism and our desire to be liberated from its bondage.

Capitalism is a socio-economic system of the past. It is a product of peoples' struggles against oppressions of the past. It has nothing to offer by way of the creation of a future liberated human dispensation. Karl Marx had in mind the bankruptcy of capitalism's ability to usher in genuine human freedom when he declared in a document which serious activists for justice should read, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that:

“The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase. (1968:98).

On the one hand capitalist history and culture is based on the heroic struggles fought against feudal decadence and stagnation. On the other hand, it derives its discipline from the culture of necessity not the spirit of freedom, arising from the violent dispossession of former producers from their fundamental means of production. In addition, its logic of development and accumulation is a product of alienated, and therefore, exploitative ownership relations to the fundamental means of human subsistence, such as land, raw materials, factories, industries, ideological instruments like schools, universities, churches, radio, television etcetera.

The sole purpose of capitalist economies is profit-making through the process of capital accumulation. Rather than bore you with the details and complexities of how capitalism works, albeit so important to know that, let me summarise the issue by making reference to a political discussion between two workers where the one argued that whatever one may think one cannot do without capital.

The conversation between the two workers is described in Walter Green's novel *Love on the Dole*. In response to the statement that one cannot do without capital the other worker replies that nobody wants to do without it; the argument is that it is wrong to use it as a means for making profit. To this the first worker retorts that it is necessary to make profit otherwise the profit-making enterprises would close down.

The second worker, making specific reference to the company that both of them worked for, replied as follows:

Yes. And Marlowes are making so little profit nowadays that it is possible that we'll all be out of work in a month's time. But that doesn't prove that Marlowes — or this engineering works — couldn't carry on simply because shareholders aren't getting any dividends. The machinery is still there ready to be used, and all of us are willing to use it, and there is plenty of raw material in the world, and people want things making. So what's stopping us all from working full time?" (1969:181).

After some instructive exchanges between the two workers that included among other things, the definition of money, the second worker summarised his argument this way:

"Money means commodities and commodities mean raw materials and labour power, so money, really, means the fruit of labour. And if you did without that — labour — everybody would starve. And whenever you use the word 'capital, again, remember that it only means raw material and the labour of working people combined, saved, stored up: then you will also remember that millionaires are men who possess millions of pounds' worth of working people's labour. That is all that money is; your labour, our fathers' and our fathers's fathers' labour. You must ask yourself whether we can do without that. Do you think we can?" (1969:184). The first fellow's final statement was a repetition of what he had said at the beginning: "You can't do without capital.

Historically, therefore, socialism arises out of the struggle to overcome and transcend the basic contradiction and alienation that lies at the heart of the capitalist system. The alienation of capitalism manifests itself in three forms.

Firstly, the socio-economic system is based on an antagonistic relationship between capital and labour. By turning labour into a commodity which can be sold and bought at the marketplace capitalist relations create a situation where those who pay wages can enslave and control the labour time of workers for purposes of squeezing every ounce of energy in order to score more and more profits. Thus the freedom to sell yourself into unfreedom is no freedom at all.

In this regard William Tabb makes a relevant observation when he declares that:

"It is difficult to be a good employer in a Christian sense. Some of us know of good employers. But it is exceedingly difficult because a good employer faces competition from a bad employer. The bad

employer produces the product and it sells for a penny less. The consumer goes to the shelf, sees the difference, buys the cheaper one. The employers who can force more out of their workers can reduce that price just a little bit and can profit from it. so it is difficult for capitalists even with a Christian background to be good, since they are caught in a structural situation” (1979:39).

Secondly, capitalism thrives on the alienation between worker and worker. This is so because unemployment, which is the basis of division among working class people, is an inherent characteristic of capitalism. Unless there exists a pool of desperate unemployed people, capital cannot reduce the costs of production in order to make more profits. In order to forestall any possibility of making demands for more pay by the workers, capital needs starving unemployed masses who can undermine such demands by their willingness to take any job at any wage level. Such a culture of fear is a structural feature of capitalism without which it could not survive.

Thirdly, capitalists are themselves at each other’s throat. Not only does their system threaten justice for whole communities and societies, but the competition between them has in the past been, and will in the future continue to be the biggest threat to world peace. The only time capitalist work together without conflict between them is when they unite against the threat that working class people pose against their system.

Again the problem of the competition between capitalists is a structural one, belonging to the very essence of the system. It is true that

“Before there was capitalism, people produced what they needed and if they produced more than they needed they exchanged with somebody else for something they wanted. There was exchange. But production was basically for use. Now corporations don’t care what they produce. They’ll produce anything — bombs, pesticides, or plastic things. The question is, ‘Does it make money?’ It is production for exchange, not for use.” (W. Tabb, 1979:40).

What is more, this conflict among capitalists creates chaos in production. This chaos is the product of unbridled competition. One of the undesirable outcomes of this chaotic production is the tendency to overproduce. When this overproduction does occur it results in sinful wastage because capitalists would rather destroy products than avail them at low prices or at no price to the people who produce them. This is only to ensure that profit levels are maintained. Frank Cunningham captures the essence of the problem when he writes:

“The contradiction between social labour and private ownership is

formidable. One effect of this contradiction is the mess all capitalist economies are in. Food in one part of the world is destroyed, while in other parts of the world (or even in the same country) people starve. There is chronic unemployment. Inflation continues. The gap between rich and poor widens. And social revolution occurs as working people organize to take political power and institute social ownership of the means of production” (1979:46-7)

It is this social ownership of the means of production that defines what socialism really is. An economy that is based on this social ownership and control of the means of production plans production to be production first and foremost for meeting human needs. It aims to eradicate alienation between people and people, between people and the things they produce, between people and the environment from which and in which production takes place.

Above all socialism refers to the liberation of the productive forces of a society. That is, the advancement and development of the technological forms as well as the forms of labour organisation. The goal of such a system is freedom. It is the liberation of human activity from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. All this though in order primarily to meet the needs of human beings.

In such a society the christian doctrine of the human person is bound to change. For those of us who are on the underside of history have over the time found it very difficult to accept, as an explanation of oppression, the theory that the oppressors are but sinful mortals. I refuse to accept differentials when it comes to the benefits of society and a common humanity when it comes to taking responsibility for sin and punishment.

I have offered only a very schematic description of socialism. A proper understanding of its many facets and perspectives can be gained through serious study, discussion and social practice. My aim in this paper is to raise the question of its roots in the progressive traditions of the Bible. Previously, capitalist and liberal perspectives have been employed to appropriate these traditions. The result has been truncated and distorted outcomes.

Let me illustrate my point by referring to the socialist egalitarianism of the Moses traditions in the Old Testament and the socialist politics of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament.

MOSES AND SOCIALIST EGALITARIANISM IN THE Hebrew SCRIPTURES.

Many Old Testament scholars now agree that there are three major

strands that dominate the various theologies of the Hebrew Scriptures. These are the Moses traditions associated with the exodus experience; the Davidic traditions linked to the establishment of the State in ancient Israel together with the concomitant restructuring of the society along class lines; and the apocalyptic traditions which represent cultural resistance in the absence of the power of political institutions and religious structures.

Of all these, the Moses traditions are the most politically progressive. This is so politically, economically and spiritually. Politically, Israel before David's time preferred a bottom-up system of government whereby power was vested first and foremost in the common action of the *bethavim* and *mishpahoth*, i.e. the network of households and extended families.

Economically, the mobilisation of village labour resources to take advantage of the newly introduced iron technology enabled forests to be cleared to make way for agriculture; terraces were developed to harness the best potential of the soil; water was captured through the newly created water storage cisterns; cooperative labour was set in motion across households that enabled the much needed surplus to be produced so that there could be development.

Spiritually, a new religious faith developed which was dialectically linked to the historical encounter of the people of Israel with Yahweh. Thus Yahweh was both the starting point and the culmination of their struggle for liberation. This faith was also both the driving force and the product of the democratic socialist egalitarianism.

There in the Hebrew Scriptures this strand is strong, even though it has suffered numerous distortions and misappropriations by later generations in Israel, not least David and his followers. It is an important basis for thinking in a socialist way within a biblical framework.

JESUS AND SOCIALIST POLITICS.

Liberal scholarship has spent a lot of sweat trying to prove that Jesus was not a revolutionary. No attempt that I am aware of has ventured to claim that Jesus's politics were not socialist.

I would like to submit that contemporary socialist politics will find a firm, if critical, support in the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. This assertion can be illustrated from many parts of the New Testament. I will pick on one text to demonstrate my contention. I refer to Luke 14:12-14. Here Jesus elaborates a fundamental socialist ethic; and this, in the book of Luke who is normally so oriented towards the rich and the powerful. Jesus describes doing good in terms of ser-

vice for the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; in other words, it is service for the victims if the structures of society and nature that shapes the vision of a liberated future. In particular, this new liberated future is not pie in the sky. It is a reality which the self-activity of these victims themselves will bring about.

The ideologically inspired mistranslation of the last sentence of verse 14 is staggering. The English version translate "God will repay you on the day the good people rise from death. I contend that the correct translation should be "You will be rewarded on the day of the uprising of the righteous. It is important not to conceal this radical self-activity of the poor and oppressed.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by pointing out that in view of the vascillating position of the Church and of christians on the matter of how to liberate christianity and the Church from their enslavement to bourgeois ideology and practice, there is no liberated future unless a socialist christian practice can be established. Addressing this question in Chile, Latin America, after the coup that overthrew Allende's regime, Gonzalo Arroyo has this to say:

"Over and above their personal involvement in the revolutionary struggle, the political task of socialist christians is to be found in the domain of ideology. This task will be made easier for them, since a 'third alternative' between fascism and revolution becomes more and more impossible every day for the popular masses and politicized christians. The reformism of christian social doctrine... has been laid to rest by the machine guns and bayonets of the military junta. That much is clear at least. Socialist... Christians now have that much to their advantage in the struggle that lies ahead. The question now is whether they will be forced to carry it on outside the Church." (1975:244).

I take the liberty of reminding us that many of the politically active church leaders in the country today were not made in the church. Their political baptism was received in the crucible of the struggles of the oppressed communities of South Africa. I refer here to Desmond Tutu, Stanley Mogoba, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane etcetera. What this means for christianity and socialism in South Africa I do not know. In the area of Bible reading many of us have already decided that there is no such a thing as a politically and ideologically neutral reading of the Bible. And so we have started the struggle to liberate the Bible so that the Bible can liberate us.

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