

WHAT DO THE CHURCHES WANT AND EXPECT FROM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS?

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Under normal circumstances and especially in a country that professes itself christian, it would have been quite sufficient to ask one "expert" to tell a conference like this what it is that the churches want and expect from religious education in schools. However, the fact that a white speaker and a black speaker had to be asked to offer their respective opinions on this otherwise innocent topic implies that our situation is far from being normal. Indeed, it would have been irresponsible to talk in generalities about what churches want and expect from religious education in schools, as if we have the same churches, and as if the churches talked about are undifferentiated institutions racially, economically and geographically. For it is an open secret that when we, in South Africa, talk about churches we do not merely refer to numerical quantities but also talk about the white and black churches, each of which have their own life, and are an embodiment of a particular social, economic and political realities and interests. Consequently, the hopes, interests and expectations of these differentiated churches cannot and will never be the same. Indeed even when these churches use the same biblical words such as salvation, God, the new life in Christ, et cetera, it has to be admitted that they do not refer to the same things or realities, because in each context those words acquire and have different meanings and connotations. In short, even the word gospel will have different meanings for black and white churches.

Since the content of the life of believers in various churches which are racially, socially, economically and geographically segregated gives rise to different hopes and expectations, I must be honest with you and admit that it is impossible for me to talk about what the churches in general expect and want from religious education in schools. I will therefore confine my remarks to black churches, because I share their life and I know something about their expectations from religious education.

However, before I proceed to spell out what those expectations and needs are, I must resist the temptation of wanting to talk about black churches in abstractions, as though churches are impersonal things or forces, thereby losing sight of the fact that churches consist of concrete men and women of flesh and blood who live a particular life in particular situations. In order not to lose sight of real persons who make up these black churches, I shall first of all ask what does it mean to be black in South Africa, and what actual living conditions constitute black existence? For it is only when we have analysed and are clear about concrete human conditions in which black life

is to be lived that we might know what their problems or sins are from which they want to be saved, and also know what they really expect from religious education in schools, if that religious education is to become relevant to those needs.

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At the risk of oversimplification, allow me to state that blackness in our abnormal society carries with it a weighty sociopolitical value, a value that determines the fate and quality of life that is open to black people. By virtue of being black a certain price is placed on our heads already at birth, a price predetermining what kind of life we must entertain, and what expectations in life we must have. Blacks are simply expected to learn and accept, that they were created to live in certain restricted areas, and to attend particular schools and churches. Put more crudely, in our abnormal "christian" society black existence is barricaded with all sorts of restrictions and limitations all of which are calculated to make them believe that meaningfulness of their lives is found in being tied to an area, so that they should regard larger areas of life in this country as off-limits to them. In sociopolitical conditions that are devoid of security, freedom and human rights, blacks are told that genuine life is possible for them even when their humanity and dignity are negated by a humiliating migratory labour system. They are told that christian life and parental responsibility can be cultivated when black males are locked up in hostels and compounds away from their wives and children. Real joy is possible, blacks are told, when they are objects of forced removals from one place to another. In short, the actual and concrete human conditions in which blacks find themselves are characterized by afflictions, imprisonment for petty offences, and sleeplessness because of congested hostels and location match-box houses. Taken together these legalised demunisations imply that black life and existence are worth very little as far as South African life is concerned, even if these blacks are baptised Christians and therefore are in principle brothers and sisters of those who are members of the one body of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, for Blacks the biblical claim that it is God's purpose that all human beings should enter into a covenant with their Creator and enjoy God's blessing and live a life of dignity and social justice does not seem to apply. For the life they know is one of concrete misery and constant reminder that they are worth "nothing" and therefore are non-persons.

What I have described as the sum total of the concrete black life may come through to you as unnecessary pre-occupation with political issues, which need not concern us at a conference on religious education. However, we ought to ask ourselves whether in our

enquiry concerning the expectations that black churches have of religious education in schools, we would be really talking about black expectations and needs without taking into account this total sociopolitical context in which black members of our churches find themselves. Is it not true that too often in our preoccupation with religious syllabi, the formulation of doctrines that are to be taught, we easily look past ordinary human beings with their pains and sorrows, thereby not really coming to grips with their real expectations, needs and hopes? Of course, in the absence of a real touch with what people feel and are going through in their sociopolitical conditions, the temptation is that religious educators would unconsciously go to these people with their own presuppositions and secret agendas of what they think the people's needs and expectations are. But if their expectations and agendas do not coincide with those of religious educators, is it realistic to expect that the people will listen to educators simply because they teach from the Bible, even if they give irrelevant answers to the conditions in which people live?

The point I am making here may sound academic, but I think it is one which ought to be seriously thought about if religious education is to have an appeal among blacks. Those of us who come from the black churches know too well how often what emanated from religious educators in schools tended to be irrelevant, dull, oppressive rather than liberative, because religious education has not often had sufficient regard for the actual conditions of the suffering members of the black churches. And matters are made worse by the fact that religious education throughout history has been largely in the hands of the middle-class and conservative people, who were much more impressed by the evils to which the poor and suffering blacks had succumbed than by the social evils from which the oppressed and the downtrodden suffered at the hands of the powerful.

Given the fact that the sociopolitical life of men and women who constitute black churches is characterized by humiliations, material deprivation, powerlessness, political and cultural domination – all of which inculcate inferiority complex and negative self-image, it follows that much of what goes on in the religious education in the schools must be radically questioned and rejected as totally irrelevant and incapable of meeting the hopes and expectations of the suffering blacks. This is particularly true because the teaching that goes on in most black schools is too theoretical; dealing with theoretical knowledge of God, creation and salvation, knowledge which often runs along life but does not cut through it by calling for a radical re-orientation of social and personal lives. Not surprisingly, religious education teaches that God is the Creator of all humans without also drawing the conclusion that God stands ready to surround, care for and defend every human being in such a way that he could be believed also as the liberator of humans from worldly bondages such

as apartheid and all other forms of sociopolitical bondage. Even more serious, religious education tends to be "inward looking" and heavenly oriented: it often emphasizes individualistic sins of the human heart, the rottenness of human life on this side of the grave; it emphasizes human weakness and helplessness in the face of sin and evil and that humans are not able to bring about real fundamental changes in this fallen world; it warns people against worldly desires for comfort, money, possessions and other non-eternal values. It teaches even blacks that the primary question is how do they find a merciful God who would save them from their private sins. Christianity is understood somehow as a means of preparing individuals for the life to come, through acknowledgement of their sins and recognition of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross; salvation is viewed thus as means of rescuing individuals from their spiritual torments; it becomes a gracious act of lifting individuals out of this miserable world of injustice, poverty, hatred and oppression. This individualistic salvation is believed to be a possibility in the midst of broken human relations, in the midst of sociopolitical injustices, in the situation in which human bodies waste away under the crushing burden of poverty and dehumanisations. God in this religious education seems to be capable of putting ony bandages on the casualties of oppression, because this God cannot really and believably bring about a fundamental transformation of this world so that his people might be accorded dignity and social justice.

All these to be sure, sound biblical and correct. However, the question is whether any religious education that leaves people's concrete sociopolitical life untouched and unsaved has any real use or message for people who, by virtue of their blackness, suffer from all kinds of material deprivation, racial humiliations and sociopolitical domination? The question is whether any religious God who is merely concerned about people's souls and the life hereafter can win the hearts of men and women of flesh and blood whose primary question is not how do I get saved but how do I find meaning and fulfilment in my life in a society that denies by being?

Put more pointedly, the question blacks are asking is not how do I have my life hereafter guaranteed but how do I find happiness, prosperity, security, employment, a decent house and physical well-being in a society in which I have no economic and sociopolitical power and role to play?

In the light of the above questions, which are generated by a feeling of racial and socio-economic domination, it is obvious that for most members of our black churches liberation or a desire for a truly human freedom and realization of human worth through a meaningful participation in the structural changes of South African society is priority number one. And this raising of the question of human liberation from social oppression as priority number one should not

be misunderstood as an indication that blacks have succumbed to the temptation of elevating the social and physical needs at the expense of the spiritual values. Rather the contrary is true. Blacks believe that what happened to and with Jesus Christ on the cross constitutes a fundamental breakthrough for human life in the history of the world. For it now means that God has finally succeeded in breaking the power of sin and its sociopolitical consequences, such as injustice, exploitation and denial of freedom. God's victory on the cross means, for blacks, that the face of the world has been turned upside-down because the real possibility of genuine life, fellowship among humans, is created. Put differently, blacks do not for a moment believe that salvation is exclusively exhausted in the

forgiveness of sins, because it also includes a re-orientation of human life and the effecting of social liberation from all worldly powers that trample on human dignity. Therefore, if salvation is for the oppressed people and is to make them whole, it must be bound up with the institutions and structures that bind men and women of flesh and blood. Put in another way, without the transformation of this world into a new world, without the renewal of the sociopolitical conditions, blacks do not believe that salvation for individual souls is real and credible for people of flesh and blood. Indeed, the salvation of this world and salvation of individuals are so intertwined that salvation of one without the other is not really possible, unless one prefers to talk about salvation in the abstract. Consequently, blacks believe that it is irresponsible for any religious education in schools to spend itself out winning men and women of flesh and blood for Christ and the churches, without asking hard questions concerning the quality of human life to which it is converting them. They believe that it is not enough for religious education in schools to proclaim correct and theoretical doctrines about God and Christ, without also seeing to it that what is proclaimed is matched by deeds and actions in the sociopolitical sphere. Indeed, any religious education in school which teaches its adherents that they can both hold their racial prejudices, tolerate the mischief of segregation and injustice, and also remain good christians, sounds to blacks rather more as religious propaganda that is adjusted to the mood of the day in order to undermine the *status quo*, than as the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the light of the above observations which make it clear that for blacks liberation is priority number one because their life is threatened by dehumanization both physically and spiritually, it follows that black churches have specific expectations from religious education in the schools. Among these are that religious education should awaken in black people a critical awareness that injustices, inequalities, and other forms of oppression are not inevitable in the

world in which God already has conquered evil. They expect religious education in schools to teach its adherents that the world in which they live is not a given world, a world that dropped from the skies. Rather it is the world which has been created by men and women and is therefore a world that can be changed by men and women – if only they could remain faithful to the struggle against evil in which God is Himself engaged. Blacks expect and want religious education to make people aware that injustice and oppression are not part of God's creation, but flow out of the sinful way in which society is now structured. And because humans are agents who structured these unjust sociopolitical conditions, religious education must teach people that they are the subjects, who make history, and it is in their power to make the world into a world in which human beings could really enjoy freedom and social justice. That is, religious education is expected to teach people to believe in themselves and their ability to transform the world into which God has placed them. It must therefore teach people to be dissatisfied with this truncated existence so that they might become creatively involved in the transformation of their earthly existence, because the salvation that Christ has procured has to do with a movement from the old humanity in Adam to the new humanity in Christ.

Black churches expect and want religious education in schools to promote forces that lead to the humanisation of men and women. It must equip and enable men and women to become vehicles of social transformation and agents for justice. In order to do this, religious education will have to believe in people and their ability to do good. Blacks expect religious education to teach people to believe that it is their Christian privilege and duty to witness concretely and unhesitantly to God's creative and redemptive concern for life. But more than this, it must remind people that God, who is able to bring about the final miracle of the resurrection of the dead, is not powerless to transform sociopolitical conditions of life here and now. It should proclaim that God is willing to empower them to start embodying and institutionalising the divine love and justice here and now in anticipation of the final victory that comes with Christ's second coming. Put differently, blacks expect and want religious education to teach people to become involved in a process of liberation, the liberation which was initiated by Christ, so that a life of quality, freedom and justice can become the property of all human-kind.

To be sure, the struggle with and under God to embody the divine love and justice in social structures will be long and difficult, and will be full of temptation to give up because the task appears impossible for humans to accomplish. However, because Christians are expected to become God's agents in the transformation of the world,

black churches expect and want religious education to take its adherents to task for failing to live up to their Christian professions. Religious education must be critical and be willing to take Christians to task when their actions and their words do not match, in order to inspire them towards a more effective embodiment of the divine justice and love in their actions.

Perhaps what the churches expect and want from religious education in the schools is much more than can be achieved realistically in anyone's life-time. But blacks believe that because the victory that Christ achieved cannot be divorced from the transformation of this world into a new world where the possibility of enjoying a truly human freedom and social justice is not something beyond God to bring about, it seems to me that religious education in the schools will have to meet these expectations if black Christians in this country are not to hope in vain for God's promise of salvation to be fulfilled.

Read by Prof. S.S. Maimela at the Conference on "Religious Education in a Changing Society" at The College of Education, Pinetown, Natal in 1983.