BLACK POWER AND JUSTICE

By Dr David Luka Mosoma[1]

Introduction

An attempt to relate Black Power and justice may sound incongrous to most of you because of the negative connotation attached to the term Black Power. In the white community Black Power was referred to as **swart gevaar** or Black danger. This reactionary attitude considered Black Power as evil and consequently the weapon of death. As Cone correctly states, "Black Power is the power to says No; it it the power of blacks to refuse to co-operate in their own dehumanization."[2] Correspondingly, Black power says Yes to liberation, freedom and justice.

This paper attempts to show that Black Power is not anti-thetical to the virtues of justice. In short, Black Power positively construed is rooted on justice because it quests for the liberation and freedom of the enslaved, exploited and oppressed humanity. That is to say, justice is the ultimate goal of Black Power.

Black power did not emerge **ex nihilo**. It was forced into existence by the existential political conditions created by white power: the dominance of white people over black people. In order to fully comprehend the transfromational character of Black Power, we need to examine the practice of each of the respective forms of power: Black Power and White Power.

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[2]James H. Cone, **Black Power and Black Theology**, pp. 39-40

Black Power and White Power

These are two forms or types of power. In any socio-economic and political contexts where black and white people encounter each other these forms of power exhibit themselves. One form of power aims at liberation while the other aims at domination and oppression. Consequently, one form of power strives for freedom and justice while the other form enforces human exploitation and degradation. For this reason, these forms of power cannot be both rooted on justice. Liberation always almost aims at the actualisation of a just social life while domination and oppression result in social disintegration and human suffering. What makes power acceptable is both the goal it serves and practice leading to that goal. If the goal is social justice, then appropriately power would exhibit itself in the praxis of human liberation. If the goal of power is social and political domination, discrimination, political oppression and economic deprivation would be the end products. To be sure, power could be either good or evil.

These forms of power enable us to discern that power may either be used to promote unity with an attended equality or disintegration expressed in disunity, oppression and inequality. Reflecting on the impact of power in the American society, Tinder writes:

> "Power may be used to separate human beings and to bring them together, as is exemplified in the policies of racial discrimination and integration in America; it may may support inequality, as when special tax benefits are accorded to the wealthy; and it may support equality, as is done in many countries through the system of national health care...."[3]

Similarly Wartenberg employs dual distiction in his understanding

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[3]Glen Tinder, **Political Thinking: The Perenial Questions**, Fourth Edition, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), p. 81.

of power: "power over" and "power to." The appropriation of this dual category of power cast light in our analysis of the nature and practice of Black Power and White Power. Clearly, "power over" and "power to" exist in one single practice of either Black Power or White Power but what happens is that in Black Power, "power to" domimates while in White Power, "power over" dominates.

White Power:"power over"

Wartenberg defines "power over" as "the ability of one human being to control another."[4] This type of power is characterised by command over others and dominion and oppression of others. That is to say, "power over" is inherently a form of domination and does not offer authentic vision for societal liberation. Similarly, Boesak, defines "power over" as "either the ability to force one's will on others, or as the ability to confine others to a certain patterns of behaviour." He concludes, "power **over others** is essentially an estranged power."[5] Tillich makes a close connection between power and justice. He asserts,"power and justice are one in the divine ground, they shall be one in human existence."[6] Therefore, an estranged power means that form of power which is rooted neither in justice nor in divine ground.

In his seminal essay, "Why Black Theology, Helmut Gollweitzer passionately describes the genesis of White Power. He regards Christianity as the source of White Power as it provided the type of religious consciousness that subsequently formed the fertile ground for "political and economic imperialism." Religious consciousness, he argued, led the the Spanish and Portuguese to establish colonial empires on "Christian" grounds. He continues,

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[4]Thomas E. Wartenberg, **The forms of power: From Domination to Transformation**, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 23.

[5]Allan Boesak, **Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power**, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 47.

[6]Paul Tillich, **Power Love and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications**, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 108.

"the reformation did not change a thing in the fate **white people prepared for the colored peoples of the world.**"[7] In a footnote, he states that Germanic -Protestant was more so responsible for continued expansion of slavery and racist apartheid than the Roman Catholic culture. Further, Gollwitzer writes:

> "For the white confessors of the faith, regardless of their particular Christian hue, the people of color were all destined for bondage, oneness in "Christ" might pertain to heaven, but certainly not on earth....The capitalist revolution of white christianized, Portestant peoples began its world wide victory and opened up a new age of slavery that even today--although in changed forms of enslavement-- has not as yet been terminated. Millions of people were treated as animals to be hunted and then **as beasts of toil.**"[8]

These words strike a familiar chord in the minds of black South Africans. We know too well the deforming and devastating practice of White Power embodied in the infamous and notorious system of apartheid. Apartheid should the understood as an example of "power over others" proper. Apartheid power was based on the philosphy of divide and conquer, aimed at subjugating the indigenous communities. This form of power was grounded on distorted conception of justice. Justice meant what promoted white self-interest. Boggs attest to this fact when he says, "white power was built on the basis of exploiting the colored races of the world for the benefit of the white races."[9] That is to say, for those who advocate White Power, skin-colour determines the measure of justice rather than any other human consideration. There is no

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[7]Helmut Gollwitzer, "Why Black Theology?" in Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, **Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979**, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 155.

[8]Ibid.

[9]James Boggs, **Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages froma Black Worker's Notebook**, (New YorK: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 50.

guarantee that Apartheid's tentacles will be completely cut, because it is common knowledge that, while the apartheid edifice is gradually collapsing, it is now being replaced by another sartle form of white power: economic power. For example, the success of a loan application is dependent upon one's ability to provide colleterals in the form of immovable properties: house or land. If you accept the argument that for some time Blacks were not allowed to own property, the demand by banks for immovable property as a colleteral is yet another extention of economic racism.

In addition, one of the challenges facing South Africa is the white monopolies which evidently epitomises the crudest example of white power. White monopoly exists "in all the principal centers of power in government, business, the professions....from board room to pulput, from the control of wealth to the writers of history, power has remained white...."[10] For this reason, non-racial approach to the problem would not succeed because white people would cry reverse racism. Similarly, affirmative action would not do because it puts Blacks in a situation where they would have to depend on the genenosity of the white monopolies to determine the measure and limit of black advancement.

It is against this background that we should reflect on Black Power as a social phenomenon aimed at destroying white racist practices that hold people in bondage in society.

Black Power: "power to" and justice

The term Black Power was brought into currency during the Civil Rights struggle in 1966 by Stokely Carmichael "to disignate the only appropriate response to white racism."[11] Cone writes, Black Power means **"complete emancipation of black people from white**

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[10]Daniel C. Maguire, **The Moral Revolution: Christian Humanist Vision**, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), p. 35.

[11]James H. Cone, **Black Power and Black Theology**, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 5.

oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary." For Cone, Black Power "is a humanising force because it is dark man's attempt to affirm his being, his attempt to be recognized as "Thou" inspite of the other, the white power which dehumanizes him."[12] The appropriation of Black Power thought was a turning point in the way in which Blacks acted politically. In the past, they acted, demonstrated, marched from a position of weakness. This idea forces Blacks to deal with the root-cause of their subjugation. This was a concerted effort, on their part, to move from a position of being acted upon to be subjects of history and shapers of their own destiny. Black Power means the black community's determination to act from a position of power in their struggle for liberation. This shift meant that Blacks were fed up to deal with the issue of rights, rather they were prepared to face the issue of power head-on.

In contrast to the idea of "power over others" characteristic of White Power, Black Power exhibits and exercises "power to" - power shared with others, empowering the community to create and achieve common good. That is to say, the concept "power to" should be understood as the human capacity to transform its social and political conditions. For our purpose, however, the term "power to" implies the transforming capacity of the oppressed community to realise its liberation objectives: the wholeness of economic and poltical life embodied in liberation and justice. Witvliet testifies, saying that through Black Power, black people seek "to liberate themselves from the inferior image that white society has imposed on them." He concludes, "Black Power is essentially concerned with the liberation of the black humanity, and this struggle is not only in accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is essentially the expression of the gospel."[13]

Black Power means the power of the black community or people power, striving "to build a society in which the spirit of community and humanistic love prevails--a community where brotherhood and

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[12]Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[13]Theo Witvliet, **A Place in the Sun: An Introduction to Liberation Theology in the Third World**, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 70.

sisterhood exist."[14] Justice serves as a linchpin and guarator of human well-being in such a community.

Liberation movements express their vision of community power differently. In rallies and political gatherings the words *Amandla* and the masses' response *Nga wethu* are used. These words serve as a reminder that political power belongs to the community rather than to the leaders. The idea of people power undermines traditional understanding that "the government has power; the people do not. The rich have power; the poor do not. Armed soldiers have power; hostages and unarmed citizens do not."[15]

In the same manner, the Pan Africanist group employs the words *Izwe Lethu* to signify land as an embodiment of power. For them, evidence of a genuine liberation lies in the aquisition and repossession of land. In contrast, the Black Consciousness movement locates power in Blackness: Identity and solidarity. The focus is on the ability of the black people to engage in a conscientious process of self-discovery of who they really are. This consciousness enables them to cultivate a postive self-image and self-respect--a necessary condition in the struggle to redeem their distorted and formed humanity.

It could be argued that a community of brotherhood and sisterhood which Black Power seeks to create is ostensibly rooted on justice. Black Power is essentially an expression of the gospel, as Witvliet claims, because it focuses on the actualisation of social justice which is an approximation of the divine will for humanity. The issue is, however, what form of justice does Black power aim to achieve? Black Power strives for a form of justice that is predicated upon the African axiom that says, *motho ke motho ka ba bangwe batho,"* meaning a person becomes truly human because of others. This ontogenetic self-affirmation serves as the foundation of African conception of justice without which no wholeness and

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[14]Douglas A. Hughes, **From A Black Perspective: Contemporrary Black Essays**, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), p. 86.

[15]Carter, Heyward, **Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality and Liberation**, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), p. 116.

fruitful social and political life together can be realised. An acknowledgement and affirmation of other human beings is crucial for contemporary society.

Since a person becomes truly human because of others, justice is, therefore, a cornersone of human togetherness and of human existence, and is a permanent passion for socio-economic and political life. Ignorance about justice hurts people and destroys any sense of community. Black Power places human beings at the center of justice claims. The principle of human affirmation has theological roots. In support of centrality of **participatory justice** as a concrete way of affirming the humanity of others, Wogaman argues, "if we are, finally, brothers and sisters through the providnece of God, then it is "just" to structure institutions and laws in such a way that communal life is enhanced and individuals are provided full opportunity for participation."[16] Like Wogaman, Black Power advocates perceive justice as "the community's guarantee of the conditions necessary for everybody to participate in the common life of society."[17]

Maguire poignantly captures the essence of justice that Black Power purpots to dispanse in these words:

> "Justice breaks the news to the ego that there are no solar gods in the universe of persons. Justice is the attitude of mind that accepts the others--all others--as subjects in their own right. Justice asserts that one's ego is no absolute and that one's interests are related.... Justice is thus the **elementary** manifestation of the other-regarding character of moral and political existence. The alternative to justice is social disintegration because it would mean a refusal to take others

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[16]J. Philip Wogaman, **Christian Perspectives on Politics**, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 158.

[17]Ibid.

seriously."[18]

This a radical way of understanding justice because it seeks to make people the measure of justice rather than the material goods they are suppose to share. The refusal of the white people to share with Blacks the wealth of the land is at the core a refusal to accept the black humanity. Denial of people's worth is in the main a denial of justice. Maguire writes, "if we deny persons justice, we have declared them worthless." He continues, "to be perfectly consistant, if we deny justice to persons we ought to kill them because we have declared them worthless. Their liquidation would be in order."[19]

White power is known for its denial of justice to the majority of the people, thereby declaring them worthless. White people's denial of black humanity served as justification for their exploitation, oppression, torture and death. The central preoccupation of Black power is "to empower the oppressed to seize control of their destiny and to establish a new order of freedom and justice."[20]

This discussion prepares the ground for some terse reflection on the concept of *ubuntu* as power beyond justice.

Ubuntu as Power beyond justice

To appreciate the justice-commitment of Black Power, we need to understand the cultural and religious formation of its thinkers. In the South African context most of the proponents of Black Power or Black Consciousness were shaped, in part, by the African traditional thought rooted in *botho* or *ubuntu*--a foundation for

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[18]Daniel C. Maguire, **The Moral Revolution**, p. 4.

[19]Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[20]J. Philip Wogaman, **Christian Perspectives in Politics**, p. 53.

African concepts of equality and justice.[21]

If we accept the following notions of justice as plausible: (1) distributive justice in which justice is thought of as apportioning of particular virtues or goods in their proper share according to the rule of mathematical equality; (2) corrective/retributive justice which implies a mean between gain and loss; (3) utilitarian justice based on "the satisfaction of desires;" (4) and contractual justice which means that "the duty to act justly stems from the duty to keep a promise"[22] to the terms of contractual obligations. Then, we have to consider the term **ubuntu** as power beyond justice because it expresses the quality of being human that form the character and disposition in people to act justly. In **ubuntu** we are not what we say but what we do. That is, what we do exhibits who we are. Aristotle once said, friends have no need of justice. Equally appealing to me: when you have **ubuntu** you have no need of Justice. Black Power accepts the view that the end of all human activity is **ubuntu**. This means that **ubuntu** is the highest end for which all else serve. Good life and happiness are rooted in togetherness--a virtue that expresses **ubuntu**. To be sure, **ubuntu** person is a just person. It could be argued that the depth of **ubuntu** contrains Black people from mounting any form of relaliatory action against the racist oppressors. Examples of Black people's rapproachment to and tolerance of their oppressors abounds in history. Zimbabwe and Namibia are fresh cases at hand. Black people did not go about killing whites, as they done to them, because of their postive self-understanding based on **ubuntu**. For instance in the 1970s, Blacks said, "we are black and beautiful" rather than black and ruthless. It is the beauty of the black humanity shaped by the quality of **ubuntu** which inspires justice-commitment of Black Power.

Arguebly, the proponents of Black Power appropriate the biblical view of God's justice as resourse for envisioning and reconstructing

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[21]Mothobi Mutloatse, ed., **Umhlba Wethu: A Historical Indictment**, (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1989), p. 192.

[22]James Sterba, **Justice: Alternative Political Perspective**, (Belmond, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company 1980), p. 29.

an alternative commununity. Maguire poignantly expresses an authentic form of justice in these words: "in the Bible, justice and love are hyphenated in the way that is "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Adding, the "partiality of biblical justice for the poor is unequivocal."[23] Furthermore, he reasons, "sometimes justice responds with holy anger in defense of the weak."[24] This way of perceiving justice and love sets the norm by which any power could be judged. **ubuntu** is a form of justice in relational practice. It is intolerent to injustice and it quests for a full actualisation of human personality; it militates against any form of power that negates and reduces human beings into cogs in the machines.

At the core of **ubuntu** traditional African concept is the refusal to condemn people as morally evil until proven so. In other words, lack of **ubuntu** renders one less human. For example, a murderer would be considered by the black community as a thing rather a person. The act of murder disquilifies one from the communion and fellowship of other humans. That is, what one does either enhances one's humanity or negates it. It is against this backdrop that the encounter between Black and White should be viewed. Blacks have almost always reserved the word person to individuals of character and moral uprightness. The skin-colour, racial and political affiliation of the person play no role in determining one's humanity in the black community. Hence the designation *umuntu* (person) and *umlungu* (white man) are crucial for Blacks. If two men are approaching, one black and the other white and then ask a group of Blacks who these men are. The immediate response would be *umuntu no mlungu* are coming. The men are identified in terms of **person** and *umlungu*. Umlungu means someone whose humanity or **ubuntu** is unknown. Once the humanity of *umlungu* has been verified and ascertained in the practical process of life together then he/she graduates from that distorted self-image to the status of *umuntu*. Clearly, the **ubuntu** concept forms the basis of genuine liberation in a community of justice where the individual's human dignity is enhanced and affirmed rather than repudiated.

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[23]Daniel C. Maguire, **The Moral Revolution**, p. 28.

[24]Ibid., p.29.

In essence, the idea of *ubuntu* focuses on who we are and what we do because it is what one says and does that we are able to discern who the person is. As Hauerawas ably states, "...our doing only can be a reflection of (who we really are) our character."[25] That is to say, the person defines himself/herself in whatever he/she does. This means that the tools used in the creation of the *ubuntu* community aims at the recognition of the human dingity of all God's people. As Paul Freire says: "When men are already dehumanised, due to the oppression they suffer, the process of their liberation must not employ the methods of dehuminization."[26] For this reason, *ubuntu* humanises rather than denegrates those it sets out to affirm. To be sure, *ubuntu* concept makes character rather than skin-colour the criterion for determining one's humanity or one's "thingness." One becomes a thing by the way in which one "... fails to grant another person total human dignity and acceptance...."[27] Often, rejection of the human dignity of another is expressed by forms enslavement, domination and racial discrimination. The *ubuntu* person is always in constant struggle against forces and powers of dehumanisation and death.

In both Church and society, the *ubuntu* idea serves as an ethical norm for what Mothobi Mutloatse calls "...a universal and self-defining value which was on an ever-ending journey to eternity."[28] He continues, "the destiny of the norm and value was for forever to evolve in response to the challenges of huamn beings. The norm transcends race, colour, ethnicity, sex or station in life."[29] It is

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[25]Stanley Hauerwas, **The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer In Christian Ethics**, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 33-43.

[26]Paulo Freire, **Padagogy of the Oppressed**, (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), p. 53.

[27]Calebo Rosando, "Black and Affican Theologies of Liberation: Marxian and Weberian Perspectives," in **Journal of Religious Thought,** vol. 42, March 1985), pp. 32-33

[28]Mothobi Mutloatse, ed., **Umhlaba Wethu**, p. 191.

[29]Ibid.

helpful to note that this understanding clarifies one of the misconceptions that Whites have had about Black power, namely that Black Power is Black racism in reverse, aiming at promoting hate for Whites. Cone refutes this charge, saying, "it is not the intention of the black man to repudiate his master's human dignity, but only his status as master."[30] The master status of Whites contradicts the *ubuntu* norm by creating hierachies of power rather than providing the necessary conditions where each is a servant of another in a reciprocal and egaliterian manner. In this way, *ubuntu* promotes human interdependence, affirming the best in each one of us.

Ubuntu as love for neighbour

It should be noted from the onset that an appropriation of *ubuntu* traditional African concept should not be construed as romanticising the past, but as an appreciation of the constribution it can offer in the search for something new and better in society today. Further, *ubuntu* can serve as a bridge between African Christian religion and Western liberal thought, such as non-racialism, becuase of its breadth and depth. That is to say, *ubuntu* intersects with Christianity in its quest and commitment to human liberation. It envisions a community in which people strive for common human good. In such a community, the love of the self and of the neighbour are inextricably bound together in *ubuntu*, hence Mbiti's expression, "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am."[31]

The idea of human inderdependence implied in this statement relates closely to Jesus' words: "Love the Lord with all your heart, and your neigbour as as yourself." The love of God for which we are called upon to embody in our daily lives is not an end in itself; it has to be expressed concretely in the love and behaviour toward the neighbour. Without this corresponding act, any claim of God's

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[30]James Cone, **Black Theology and Black Power**, p. 14.

[31]John Mbiti, **African Religions and Philosophy**, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 147.

love remains an abstraction. In the preceding statement, Jesus communicates one essential veracity: loving behavour toward the neighbour is both an expression of faith in God and one's relationship to God in the neighbour. This means that one's self-understanding is crucial in how one relates to others. One's attitude and treatment of others demonstrates one's **ubuntu** or lack of it. One's faith in God or lack of it. Jesus locates love at the centre of human activity and relationship. It it not so much of what one knows as to what one does with what one knows. It is not a question of knowing the truth but rather the issue of doing the truth.

In conclusion, it should be clear from the forgone discussion that **ubuntu** virtue forms the basis for an authentic just community. It provides both the moral and theological premise for life together because in it, the sacred and the political belong together. One cannot claim to act justly in Church while one fails to act justly in the political arena. That is to say, life in Church has far reaching implications for the political and visa versa.

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