

# THE STATE OF BLACK SOUTH AFRICA: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

The current carnage and destruction of black life which engulfs many of our communities, is serious challenge to the relevance of our faith as members of the Black Christian community. How we understand and respond to this present crisis will determine the future of our role in the new South Africa. It is even risky to speak about the new South Africa because what we experience everyday as we watch with horror the destruction of black life, is the ruthless tenacity of the old racial order of Apartheid seeking to reconsolidate its political base despite the euphoria about the ongoing process of negotiation.

Black Theology since its inception in the late sixties has sought to promote the dignity of black life by developing a strong incarnational faith geared to active resistance against all forms of racial oppression. To what extent has black theology achieved this will depend on how we understand the current role of the black church leaders and members in our present context. For I want to believe that the impact of the black theology movement can only be judged by the active role of black Christians in resisting the enslavement and oppression of black people irrespective of their religious affiliation. My impression, as I try to understand what is happening is two-fold. The Black Christian community on the whole has played a very significant role in supporting and promoting the broad democratic movement especially through a number of key leaders both the laity and the clergy. We must begin to appreciate this broad based view of the Black Christian community that has and continues to be at the fore front of all our political struggles in South Africa. The other important dimensions which are worth noting are the specific forms of resistance that have created a critical climate for resistance. We have witnessed over the past few years an active participation of the black

clergy in organised protests in our communities. The culmination of this activism led to the development of the Kairos document, which provided a significant theological justification to continue to engage in the struggle for liberation. I mention these two aspects in order to challenge the view that black theology is a movement reflected in particular documents published by black theologians and not embodied in the commitment of ordinary black Christians participating in different aspects of our struggle. Such a view must be rejected with the utter contempt it deserves. For it portrays black theology as purely an intellectual movement not rooted in the faith praxis of the Black Christian community. This is a truncated view of theology, one that reflects the eurocentric idealism that has characterized most of Western theology. If our struggle as black Christians has not been nourished by our faith and vice versa then we cannot speak today of a black theology movement.

But the real challenge today is how black Christian praxis addresses the destruction of black life. That for me is the crux of the matter. We must move beyond an obsession with self denigration and destructive self criticism and begin to reclaim the resources of our faith. That task I believe requires a serious analysis of 1) who we are, that is a question of critical self identity 2) an analysis of the present socio-political dynamics and their impact on the process of transition 3) provide a theological critique of the present political situation 4) redefine the need for a fresh black Christian praxis.

## **1 MOVING BEYOND THE FACADE OF NON-RACIALISM**

There is a growing disillusionment about the establishment of non-racial democracy in South Africa. This is encouraged by the perception, that the forces of violent death manifest themselves in the black communities with few exceptions in the white areas. This raises fundamental questions about the political vision especially of a non-racialist orientation about our current struggle. Such a vision unfortunately undermines one of the important characteristics of our struggle, that of race. What we must appreciate is that the policy of Apartheid has shaped the basic attitudes of our communities especially those of whites about the insignificance of black life. On the other hand for many blacks this has encouraged attitudes of self denigration - hence black life in the context of the prevailing violence is cheap. The denial

of the dynamics of race and ethnicity whilst understandable on the part of those who have been victims of Apartheid, cannot wish away the legacy of racism and ethnic chauvinism in our context. This has been confirmed by recent events at the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park during the invasion of the A.W.B., as well the troubling ethnic conflict in our communities.

But to speak of race and ethnicity only in terms of victimization is not enough, what is at stake is that race and ethnicity have been the main influence in the socialization process of many South Africans under the Apartheid System. Race and ethnicity have shaped the mindset of many individuals thus consolidating or providing authenticity to divisions that continue to influence our lives even today. What I am suggesting is that the racial and ethnic discourse that is pervasive in our context informs the actions of many individuals especially those of white and black conservatives. This is reflected in the desire for example to establish an Afrikaner 'Volkstaat', the obsession with a narrow and static view of Afrikaner Culture and tribalism. I want to suggest also that this kind of ethnic chauvinism will continue to haunt our political context for a very long time. Non-racialism as a new form of ideological discourse will not eradicate racism and ethnic chauvinism. This will only deepen the denial of the racial and ethnic character of our struggle. This sad denial is reflected in the leadership crisis that we see in some of our main political movements in the country today.

What we need to appreciate as we reexamine our present political context is that whilst race and ethnicity have been the dominant forces in shaping our life, they have also had adverse economic consequences. The poor and the marginalised continue to be the majority of black people. Squatter camps are reservoirs of black dehumanization and poverty, this is not to deny the manifestation of white pockets of poverty in certain urban areas, but on the whole the economic structures have benefitted whites. What the non-racialist discourse misunderstands is that because of the historical impact of racist and ethnocentric forms of political life, the legacy of racial capitalism under Apartheid will continue to prevail even in the so called new South Africa. Therefore to deny the concrete and yet devastating dynamics of racism and ethnic chauvinism is very dangerous. The alliance of the COSAG group should not be underestimated for it represents a bad omen for the future.

How then do we move beyond this facade of non-racialism as we attempt to come to grips with our present political context? We must emphasise

more than before that our struggle is an antiracist one and is against all forms of ethnic chauvinism, tribalism and sexism. I have focused on the question of racism and ethnic chauvinism because they are products of the Apartheid legacy which is one of the root causes of the current violence in many of our communities.

Our current struggle against the forces of death must be grounded in a new sense of black identity, one that upholds the moral imperatives of the black religious experience. At the core of this black or African religious experience is the radical affirmation of our humanity, some times referred to as ubuntu or botho. To be human is to resist all that which seeks to destroy life. It is also a relational concept that affirms mutual moral responsibility - 'Motho ke Motho ke batho' This moral dimension of our humanity is what shapes our identity. However because of the devastating forces of racism and ethnic chauvinism we see the denial of our true humanity, one which manifests itself in the horrendous acts of violence in our communities.

What this new sense of identity should emphasise is that as black people we are committed to the struggle for life, the affirmation of true humanity one that is antiracist opposed to ethnic chauvinism and committed to the creation of a just democratic order for all. What is at stake, is reaffirmation of our black identity as the moral initiative to provide leadership. As the Media continues to portray black life as negative, prone to violence and death, this new identity seeks to aggressively affirm the moral courage to challenge the legacy of Apartheid. I want to suggest that inspite of the criticisms by both white liberal and non-racialist theologians, black theology has and continues to inspire this kind of moral leadership. I want to emphasise this positive dimension of black religious identity because it must inform our future christian praxis.

## **2 AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION**

Tinyiko Maluleke in his paper on a comprehensive analysis of the South African situation makes a very interesting point.

The central problem of the present political process in South Africa is that an attempt is being made to pour new wine into old skins. The

structures of Apartheid cannot be strengthened at the same time as a new dispensation is being worked out. The neglect of structural transformation in the direction of democracy and, the naivete of some liberation movements that structural transformation can wait while more urgent issues are being attended to is proving to be a nightmare. This is especially true because, the structure, namely government is still firmly in place [JBT Vol 6 No 2 pp36-37].

What we have to understand, inspite the euphoria about the ongoing process of negotiation in Kempton Park is that the power relations have not changed. The white regime continues to wield tremendous political influence. For example the idea of the government of National unity was not the idea of the African National Congress. But the National Party successfully persuaded the A.N.C to adopt this dubious principle. I suppose for various reasons. The concept of power sharing in terms of the well known legacy of Apartheid, is a fraudulent one, because it assumes that the oppressor and oppressed will through this kind of political partnership achieve a sense of stability and shared political power. What we need to explore together is, what is behind this government of national unity.

It is clear that the outcome of our long struggle to dismantle Apartheid will not result in a truly democratic order, were the oppressed finally will achieve their rights. The concept of majority rules has been abandoned for the sake of political expediency. The main focus now is on the protection of minority rights. This represents a major contradiction in the so-called new political dispensation. This idea of a grand coalition between the Nationalist Party and the African National Congress will create a state that will be dominated by both Elites the Yuppies and Buppies of the New Political dispensation. The N.P would still gain prominence. Steven Friedman in his interesting essays make the same point even more convincingly:

Even if a settlement is inevitable, a democracy is not: indeed, ensuring one may be far more difficult than negotiating a new political order. The Legacy of polarization could persuade both sides that the only viable settlement is one negotiated between elites from which the opponents of negotiation are excluded [Friedman 1991 p194].

He goes on to state ...

To expect a democratic culture on either side of the divide to emerge soon would be unrealistic. The transition period, stretching up to and well beyond the installation of a new political order will be marked by many pressures which will threaten democracy and, perhaps, many instances it is limited in practice. But the space to create a democratic culture and society may exist. Whether it is used will depend on the political actors [Friedman 1991 p195].

I do not wish to belabour the point, to say we must be realistic, the new political dispensation, will not represent victory over the white racist domination, but a new form of political co-option in maintaining the white sociopolitical hegemony. What is very sad to me as a black christian is that a number of prominent church leaders are providing theological justification for this deceptive political arrangement. Those who challenge the aspiration of black people not to be duped by this coming new form of oppression are equally opposed to black christian praxis that seeks to expose this profound contradiction. This creates a new challenge for any black Christian praxis. It means a simplistic view of who the enemy of the political aspirations of the majority of the oppressed people will not do, our enemy is no longer simply the sociopolitical racial order of Apartheid, but a more complex form political hegemony based on the political and economic interests of certain political movements from the centre who seek to entrench their positions of power.

In other words the challenge is to deal with new forms of political alliances, which will finally determine the nature of the new political dispensation. It is in this context that the hermeneutic of suspicion becomes a new weapon for our struggle. Cornel West, I believe makes a very important point in this regard.

The two basic challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans are self-image and self determination. The former is the perennial human attempt to define who and what one is, the issue of self identity. The latter is the political struggle to gain significant control over major institutions that regulate peoples lives [West. 1982 p22].

I want to suggest that the current sociopolitical dynamics that inform the process of transition are still to a major extent controlled by the proponents

of Apartheid. They provide not only the logistical support for the process but because of their enormous economic and political resources determine its direction. It is an irony to observe that some of the so-called key political players at Kempton Park are homeland leaders who are part of the creation of the Apartheid system. They all continue to be on the payroll of the South African state whose interests they cannot repudiate. The whole process is very suspect but the outcome is even more suspect. What is at stake in this process, is that the aspirations of the black majority are not at centre of debates but party interests and especially the political posturing of certain politicians to gain prestige and power. In other words the pain and the struggle of black folk who are being murdered everyday is not the driving force in this process. The process as a whole lacks the moral imperatives that are a focus of our struggle. It is a faceless process for it ignores the ongoing death and tragedy that affects the majority of black people in this country. The question I want to pose is, how can black church leaders continue to support this process without demanding certain crucial correctives to the present process of negotiations? It is my hope that during this conference important solutions will be suggested to address this problem.

### **3 A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF THE PRESENT POLITICAL SITUATION**

In my introductory remarks I mentioned that Black Theology since its inception in the late sixties sought to promote the dignity of black life by developing a strong incarnational faith geared to promote resistance against forms of racial oppression. I want to suggest that the task has not changed, what has changed is the nature of oppression. The oppressive structures today whilst subtle are more demonic and destructive, more black people have died during this period, and violence in many of our black communities is at its peak. An average of 5-10 people are killed everyday. The question we have to ask is why? How do we respond to the destruction of black life from a theological perspective? This is the challenge this conference will have to answer as we attempt again to assert our full humanity as the people of God?

Like the old christian communities of the past especially in biblical times, we are called to be vigilant, to develop profound scepticism about the values

of any social order that seeks to destroy life. This is part of our prophetic existence. The biblical drama highlights the contradictions of human existence always by pointing us to eschatological presence of God's realm (of Luke 21:7-18) when the disciples wanted for an assurance of things to come Jesus said, "Beware that you are not led astray: for many will come in my name and say, I am he and the time is near. Do not go after them" Luke 21:8. These messianic pretenders posed a challenge for community making deceptive claims to be the Messiah. There are the false prophets who promise miraculous deliverance, claiming that the kingdom of God is about to appear. I do not want to pretend that in our present political context we confront the same impending catastrophe of the community that was addressed by Jesus, but what is crucial is the ability to repudiate the claims of those who speak in simplistic terms about our ultimate deliverance. In every age the church is confronted by these messianic pretenders. This we encounter especially amongst some of our church leaders who have committed themselves to the view that the present negotiations will usher in a new political dispensation. At a time when most of our people are killed in black communities we hear deceptive claims about peace. And yet the structures of violence represented by the military continue to promote havoc and destruction. The critical question we have to confront, who is really speaking the truth in this context? Who really represents the voiceless, the oppressed in this period of turmoil and conflict? Whose interest are being served by the current negotiation process? Even the Church is suspect for it no longer speaks for the majority of the oppressed people but promotes views of the key political players at Kempton Park.

One of the fundamental problems with the church today is that it is being co-opted by certain political forces in our society. Power relations to great extent play a very important role in how church leaders respond to our present crisis. There is a tendency amongst many of us not to confront our political leaders. What is becoming clear is that as churches we respond to the initiatives of certain leaders. If you analyze recent statements from Churches, they reflect this common tendency. Our task as we respond to this crisis is to develop a process of critical theological reflection of the role especially of the black churches. Someone not long ago suggested to me that we have lost our prophetic urge as black churches, because the white liberal agenda domi-

nates everything in our life as people. We continue to be preoccupied with problems which are not our own.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

One of the challenges of moving out of this political impasse characterized by ongoing violence and deepening ideological conflicts is for the church to promote a new presence. This christian presence is a new form of christian praxis whose goal is to re-educate the majority of the oppressed people about the contradictions of the present negotiation process. The task is an educational one, one that is not just geared to simplistic voter education which has become a band wagon of many church groups. But one that exposes the serious contradictions of the new political dispensation in terms of how it fails miserably to address the aspirations of the oppressed majority of our people.

What is critical about this new christian praxis is to challenge political leaders to be accountable in terms of providing concrete evidence of their commitment to create a just social order. This quest for radical accountability has to address a number of issues. It must address the question of the self image of the majority of our black people whose whole existence has been deformed and destroyed by the system of Apartheid. This self image which is being ravaged by forces of death, must rediscover a deeper understanding, a certain basic religious, cultural values of ubuntu. There is a sense in which this call for accountability amongst our leaders is a demand on their part to promote a positive black self image as part of establishing a new democratic social order. It is also in this context that a black theology can play a creative role in fostering a positive black self image, whose main thrust is antiracist, in that it respects, and celebrates at the same time a positive self image of others. The legacy of self hatred which was promoted by Apartheid, must be challenged by a determination to demand respect for who we are as a people. This is part of our quest as we redefine our role in the evolving social order. The other aspect of this demand for accountability from our leaders, is the invitation to ensure that the structures of the new society serve the needs of all irrespective of status, race or gender. For a new South Africa to be a true blessing to all, it must promote a democratic ethos that would become an envy for the whole of Africa. We have many former liberation movements

who after assuming political power, have become oppressive regimes. This should be avoided at all cost. The answer is to hold leaders accountable to cause of justice. The hermeneutic of suspicion should be at the centre of this call for accountability. What we demand from our leaders is moral leadership informed by broadly accepted principles of democracy.

The other critical challenge confronting the christian community in this period of uncertainty, conflict and violence, is to promote a new sense of unity especially amongst the oppressed majority of our people. The idea of the Patriotic front has not materialised amongst our political movements. It must be revived. Here the black churches in the townships can play a very key role. Whilst the peace structures are important as an avenue to promote political tolerance and reconciliation. Churches must challenge especially black political leaders to strive for solidarity by engaging in those programmes that involve our people in working for common political goals. It is in this context that the efforts of Bishop Tutu and Bishop Mogoba must be commended for bringing together Mr Mandela and Chief Buthelezi. This role of challenging black leaders must be pursued vigorously. Writing about this need to address the crisis of black leadership, Cornel West in his recent book "Race Matters", makes a pertinent remark,

The crisis in black leadership can be remedied only if we candidly confront its existential. We need national forums to reflect, discuss, and plan how best to respond. It is neither a matter of a new Messiah figure emerging, nor of another organization appearing on the scene. Rather, it is a matter of grasping the structural and institutional processes that have disfigured, deformed, and devastated black America such that the resources for nurturing collective and critical consciousness, moral commitment and courageous engagement are vastly underdeveloped. We need serious strategic and tactical thinking about how to create new models of leadership and forge the kind of persons to actualize these models [West 1993, p.45].

What is at stake in the ongoing carnage and destruction of black life is to demonstrate and to promote, a faith that makes a radical difference. That faith for me over the years has and continues to be nurtured by black theology. A theology that is reflected in the songs, the revivals, healing liturgies of the black churches in the ghettos of this our sad and beautiful land. The

church as a faith community must also through its influence foster new models of leadership committed to just democratic values.

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