

The Social-Cultural Analysis of the Origins and Development of Black Theology

by Dr Cecil Mzingisi Ngcokovane

For almost two decades, Black Theology has bordered on definitions and has not successfully outgrown such a stage. Hence a Black Theology Conference held in Wilgespruit-South on 16-19 August 1983, felt the need and urgency to move out of such impasse.⁽¹⁾ The consensus among contemporary perspectives is that Black theologians must now address themselves, *inter alia*, to the content of Black theology and its methodology.⁽²⁾ Beyond, if not, within the definitional stance of Black theologians, there is a problem with regard to conceptual tools of analysis. Black theologians have hitherto, employed race analysis in their theological reflection. But the crucial question to be raised is: To what extent is the racialistic conceptual analysis adequate to understand problems of Blacks in South Africa, North America, African continent and the rest of the world? I will focus this question on South Africa in order to be contextual in my approach to the topic under consideration.

I would like to argue that any social-cultural analysis of the origins and development of Black theology in the world, especially in South Africa must of necessity take into serious account the historical materialist background. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to dismiss the tools which have been used for a discourse on Black theology so far. Rather, to find out whether such tools of analysis cannot be extended to deal with the reality of political economy of race and class in God's world. Thus an adequate social-cultural analysis of the origins and development of Black theology needs to take such an approach as one of the starting points.

Both the content and methodology of Black theology in South Africa has not taken into serious account the exploitation of African labour.

The objective of this paper is to show why and how this labour was and continues to be exploited. Thus I am more interested in the relations between social-cultural facts of Black

1. Cf. Conference Report entitled: Black Theology Revisited, sponsored jointly by The Institute for Contextual Theology and New Horizon Project, Wilgespruit, 16-19 August 1983, p 1.
2. Ibid

exploitation both as a working class and as peasants. I would also like to show how such facts influence the development of racism in our land.

I regard the identification of causal relations as a key to an adequate explanation of how racism developed to be what it is in South Africa today and, how such a development has, in turn given rise to Black theology. Moreover, I would like to probe into the reasons why the origins and development of Black theology have not dealt with questions of black labour exploitation.

The Problem and its Matrix: Towards a Theoretical Framework

According to R Turner, most people make choices within a very narrow context, defined by a set of implicit and explicit social-cultural, religious and economic values which they do not realise can themselves be chosen or rejected. Black Christians and their theologians have been victims of such blind choices.⁽³⁾ They have been victimised by religion (Christianity) with its Western theological presuppositions that are rooted in the Euro-American cultural ideology. At the bottom of such a cultural ideology are the western capitalist and imperialist interests. How is it the case that Black theology has not been able to unmask such latent presuppositions? I will come back to this question later.

A close look at the socialisation process will help us understand the problem faced by Black theologians today. I agree with Turner that socialisation prepares people not just for social living, but for living out specific roles in specific social structures.

Hence Turner contends that:

The social structure may be one of gross inequality, but if the socialisation mechanisms are working effectively the independent kicking child can be turned into the passive, accepting adult at the bottom of the pile, who accepts her/his role because he/she has been deprived of the capacity to conceive of any other way of existing. That is, the effect of the process of socialisation is to make a particular social structure and a particular human model seem to be natural, and to hide the fact that it is not natural, and could be changed.⁽⁴⁾

Indeed, Turner is correct when he contends that the process of socialisation can thus narrow down a person's range of perceptions and choices to a predefined social reality.⁽⁵⁾ It is in such an ideological-cultural captivity that the Church in the "Black World" finds itself. Black theology needs to hang loose of such captivity in its theological reflection. Black theologians ought to uncover how the socialization process can induce acceptance of inequality by the oppressed masses in an unequal social structure. Black theologians must unmask those latent social-cultural and ideological forces that make the oppressed masses come to believe in their "own" inferiority and in the natural rights of their exploiters and oppressors. How such blind acceptance of inequalities works has been clearly pointed out by Turner when he says that:

This is not something necessarily brought about by the Machiavellian cunning of the dominant group. Once a social structure is in existence, mechanisms take over which tend to keep it going. The dominant group are also being socialised. They are being socialised into dominant roles, with the concomitant belief in the naturalness of their dominance, of their superiority,

3. Turner, R *The Eye of a Needle*, Christian Institute, Braamfontein, 1972, p 10

4. *Ibid.*, p 11

5. *Ibid.*

whether it be race superiority in South Africa, caste superiority in classical India, or the superior virtues and intelligence of the middle classes in the 19th century Europe. The system seems to perpetuate itself, . . .⁽⁶⁾

In South Africa, a social structure such as the one mentioned in the above statement is perpetuated by capitalism.

Turner correctly points out that the human model characteristic of the dominant white group in South Africa is the capitalist human model. He also contends that the values imposed by the socialization process in capitalist societies are those that particular form of society needs in order to survive.⁽⁷⁾ Turner identifies some essential elements of capitalist society as follows:

1. "Some people control the means of production. The rest of the population, having no tools or land of their own, have no option but to work for those who do own the tools or the land. And the owners naturally expect to get something out of permitting them to do so. The basis upon which they are employed is that some of the products of their labour should be given to the capitalist in return for the 'right' to use the capitalist's means of production. To put it another way, the worker receives wages that are less than the value of his/her labour. The capitalist accumulates capital by taking the surplus product, which he/she has not worked to produce.
This is exploitation ...
2. The capitalists' objective in exploiting workers is not, as might be expected, simply their own personal good, in terms of a comfortable life and a high level of consumption. If it were, they would, once they had made their first million,

retire, relax and enjoy themselves. But they do not. They ruin their health competing for a level of wealth which they could not possibly consume, even if they wanted to.⁽⁸⁾

Capitalists continue to accumulate because for them, accumulation becomes an end in itself instead of being a means to an end.

Such an activity results in the social system becoming an independent thing and people becoming subject to it.⁽⁹⁾ This leads to Turner's third essential element of capitalist society, namely, that:

3. At an advanced level of accumulation, the need for markets as an outlet for the products of all this accumulated capital becomes important. It therefore becomes necessary to boost the consumption of that sector of the population which has surplus cash. They have to be forced to consume the product, whether they "want" to or not . . . This is the role played by advertising This forced consumption can occur among certain social groups at the same time as other social groups are being forced to restrict consumption by being paid low wages so that their employers can accumulate more.⁽¹⁰⁾

If one were to use J Habermas's expression of labour, one would contend that labour is a fundamental category of human existence.⁽¹¹⁾ Hence Buti Tlthagale drawing upon Gregory Baum could say that "through labour (people) transform nature. Through labour human beings build their environment, their world and in so doing they simultaneously build themselves. In a collective labour engagement, (people) build themselves together.

6. Ibid

7. Ibid p 12

8. Ibid, pp 13-14

9. Ibid, p 14

10. Ibid, pp 14-15

11. Habermas, *J Knowledge and Human Interests*, Hienemann, London, 1972, p 25

Thus (people) in their collective labouring efforts become co-creators. They are the effective subjects of what they create.⁽¹²⁾ Such a conception of labour is ideally sound, but the capitalists' system upsets the whole scheme of co-creation. How such a process takes place, has been well articulated by Turner when he says that:

In (a capitalist) society, acquisition, ownership and consumption of material goods is the greatest aim of human beings. Work is only a means to this. It is not something an individual does because of the inherent meaningfulness of creative activity. It is an unpleasant necessity to be got over as soon as possible so that you can go home and consume.⁽¹³⁾

What this statement means is that the worker is a means for the capitalist's end of accumulating. Hence Turner contends that this means that work is often objectively as unpleasant as it is described to be. "The capitalist employs the worker for an objective other than the worker's own satisfaction, so the nature of the work and the work environment are designed for that other purpose. They are designed to maximise profit, not to give the worker satisfaction from a meaningful task."⁽¹⁴⁾ Blacks, both in the U.S.A. and in the "Republic" of South Africa are victims of such an economic system. However Black theologians are still hesitant to take a plunge and vigorously attack this issue head on. Hence the origins and development of Black theology have been extremely lacking in this regard. Thus I shall now look at how the capitalist system and its values has actually influenced theological reflec-

tion in capitalist societies such as U.S.A., S.A. and Western Europe. Imbued by western capitalist and cultural values, the carriers of Christianity have, in turn, influenced theological discourse among Black theologians. To understand this process, we must take a close look at cultural domination in a particular context, for example, South Africa, and also at an ethical system that places limitations on human community.

Conquest and Cultural Domination

Bernard Magubane has correctly pointed out that the supremacy of the whites, their values and civilisation, was only won when the cultural and value system of the defeated African was reduced to nothing and when the Africans themselves loudly admitted the cultural hegemony of their conquerors.⁽¹⁵⁾ Such a notion came also true in the religious sphere.

Christianity carries in it, *inter alia*, two kinds of ethical system. According to Turner, one kind accepts the predominant human model and tries to rationalise it, to smooth the edges. Turner calls such an ethical system an "internal morality" which he articulates as follows:

... pay your debts, give to the poor, don't tell lies, don't steal (i.e. don't deprive people of property which is theirs in terms of the given legal-property system in ways that the system does not permit). In a slave society, feed your slaves properly, don't sell their children until they are eight years old. In war, kill people with bullets, but not with poison gas.⁽¹⁶⁾

Such an ethic justifies or legitimizes institutionalized violence, racism and economic exploitation. But it also does

12. Conference Report on Black Theology, op cit, p 25

13. Turner, R, op cit, p 15

14. Magubane, B M *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979.

15. Turner, op cit, p 17

16. Ibid, p 18

more. It creates passivity on the part of the victims of such a system and also imbues them with a sense of guilt whenever they question such unethical values. Consequently, they accept such an ethical system as a given not to be challenged. Hence the exploited and the oppressed find themselves in a vicious cycle of pain. This kind of an ethical system also makes life easier for people within the system who find themselves not challenging the human model implicit in the system. Black theologians are constantly haunted by this kind of ethical system.

Although Black theologians employ the second kind of ethical system, namely "transcendent morality" in their theological reflection, they nonetheless fall short of their essential task. Transcendent morality is defined by Turner as:

(An ethical system which goes beyond the given and ask the fundamental question – 'what is human life for, what is the meaning of human life?')⁽¹⁷⁾

It is an ethic which challenges the human model implicit in the system. The "transcendent ethic" demands that we question our taken-for-granted ways of behaving, that we must continually question them. It is on the basis of the "transcendent ethic" that Black theologians like other religious leaders, have continually attacked both old religious forms and social forms. They have attacked religious forms which have, in fact, lost their transcendence and which have instead become merely repetitive rituals. Black theologians have attacked social forms which have become both unquestioned, hence mechanical and

non-human, and unjust, hence de-humanising.⁽¹⁸⁾ But such an attack is not new because we find it in Hebrew prophets, Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Such a view is best articulated by Turner when he contends that:

We have seen the Hebrew prophets attacking the worship of the Golden Calf—both an idol with a ritual attached, and a way of life in which personal material satisfaction turns one way from one's neighbour. We have seen Christ breaking the Sabbath to cure the sick—so showing that the mechanical ritual of Sabbath observance must give way to an intelligent understanding of the transcendent significance of the Sabbath as a day in which I cease from my own selfish pursuits and consider the needs of the whole, and hence of other men and women. We have seen Muhammad challenging the way of the wealthy merchants of Mecca, who believed that their wealth gave them power over both people and gods, by asserting the universality of the one God, who cannot be bought, and by asserting that wealth must be used for social purposes, not for individual purposes.⁽¹⁹⁾

However, history of religion shows us that it is one of gradual decline of such transcendent beliefs and practices into the given,

a decline whereby they become nothing more than a 'traditional way of life' in which religious observance is mere ritual and in which the transcendent ethic gets moulded into the very untranscendent social structure, and becomes an 'opiate of the people'; until a new reformer shatters the structure, either by creating a new religion (Muhammad), or by appealing to the pristine transcendence of an earlier religious genius (Calvin).⁽²⁰⁾

Nevertheless, the social relevance of religion does not only lie in the fact

17. *Ibid*

18. *Ibid*

19. *Ibid*, pp 18-19

20. *Ibid*

that it commands us to question accepted human models and the accepted social structure in which they are embodied, but also lies in the clinical examination of such accepted human models and social structures.

Thus I J Mosala has indicted Black theologians of being blind to the fact that in their attack/criticism of "white theology", they are actually using the same tools of analysis that whites have traditionally used to justify their case. According to Mosala, while Black theology has advocated black liberation and the black experience as a focus in its analysis it has continued to draw its biblical hermeneutical assumptions from white theology. Mosala's strongest point is that Black theology does this irrespective of the class character of the Bible. In doing this, Mosala slashes J Cone, C West, A Boesak, S Gqubule, E Mgojo, S Dwane and M Buthelezi.⁽²¹⁾ But I think that Mosala's indictment is selective relative to these Black theologians, especially with regard to J Cone and C West.

C West, for example, has long claimed that Black theology and Marxist thought share three characteristics as follows:

1. Both adhere to a similar methodology, the same way of approaching their respective subject matter and arriving at conclusions.
2. Both link some notion of liberation to some future socio-economic condition of the down-trodden.
3. And this is most important, both attempt to put forward trenchant critiques of liberal capitalist America.⁽²²⁾

For C West, "Black theologians and Marxist thinkers must preserve their own existential and intellectual integrity and explore the possibility of promoting fundamental social amelioration together".⁽²³⁾ While Mosala has raised a thought provoking criticism one begins to realise the need to ask him the question: What tools of analysis is he using? Who has given him and other Black theologians (including myself) the right to theologise about the black working class and black peasants if we are not part of their struggle? Have the poor, the oppressed and the black working class given us the mandate to do theology about them? What does the record show in terms of our daily participation in the struggle of black people?

B Tlhagale contends that "if Black theology is to talk meaningfully about Christian symbols and how they affect the socio-economic conditions of the Black people, it will have to grapple with the fundamental contradictions that explain the nature of the present society."⁽²⁴⁾ If the historical materialist background is not taken into serious account by Black theologians, Black theology as in the past, would have been done in a vacuum. Hence the need for Black theologians to boldly unmask the falsehood of white theology with its cultural ideology in a manner that will clinically deal with the question of political economy of race and class not only in South Africa but throughout the world. Thus, Black theology in its development, needs to outgrow the two kinds of ethical system which I mentioned earlier on (i.e. "Internal Morality" and "Transcendent Ethic").

21. cf Mosala, I J "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology" in *Unquestionable Right to be Free*, by Mosala, I.J. and Tlhagale, B (eds), Skotaville Publishers, 1986, pp 175-196.

22. West, C "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, by G Wilmore & J Cone (eds), Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1979, p 553

23. Ibid

24. Tlhagale, B "Towards a Black Theology of Labour" in Conference Report on Black Theology, op cit, p 25

Conclusion

Black theology both in its origins and development has been held in captivity by a theology which is grounded in Euro-American capitalist interests and cultural values – a theology that has never given room to the democratization of the Church structure (as an institution) and theological enterprise. Thus democratization can only be done by and/or with the masses themselves. Here I am talking about “people’s theology” and/or “ministry by the people”. The starting point for such a ministry or theology is a sober look and clinical criticism of the present theological captivity in which Black theologians find themselves. Indeed, such a starting point will constitute a realistic vision for the future of Black theology.

Since theology is done within the confines of a Euro-American cultural ideology and capitalist interests, Black theology must now begin to take the notion of democratization into serious consideration. This will be a new stage – a stage when the masses assume full control of their lives in all spheres of life, especially religious life.

One of the problems of capitalist societies and their Churches, is that they allow democratization only in the sphere of politics or the state and deny the masses of society democratic participation in the economic sphere. This is due to the notion of the maintenance of the sanctity of private property in the means of production. Thus there is democracy in the political sphere and lack of democracy in the economic sphere. Consequently, the dominant theologies of the Euro-American traditions are bound up in such a captivity and, in turn, such a captivity has affected Black theology.

The lack of democracy in the economic sphere, that is to say, the

black working masses not having their own representatives, and participation in the decision-making corporate bodies, and in the political sphere, consequently creates the pattern for the lack of democracy for the black working masses in all other institutions of society – including the Church and its seminaries.

The biggest problem Black Christians face in undemocratic, bureaucratic society, such as South Africa is that theology is designed and controlled by a white group ruling over blacks. Since South African society is one that is characterised by racial and class oppressions, all theology for the oppressed group of lower classes is irrelevant because it is designed and controlled by a group other than the oppressed themselves. Hence theology in a situation of class and racial oppression tends to justify the existing socio-cultural, political and economic inequalities. Theology, therefore, has perpetuated ignorance and acceptance of the system on the part of Blacks in the world. It is precisely at this point that a Black theologian has need of a stern theological education from the people below. This is the basis of the demand for “people’s theology” or “ministry by the people”.

In South Africa, for example, “people’s theology” must include the following elements: A clinical examination and critique of traditional western theology in light of the issues addressed by the KAIROS Document and contextual theologies that have emerged; a reflection on the South African political, economic and educational situation and its international dimensions; and, a reflection on one’s perception of one’s faith and experiences inside and outside the Church. There must be a thorough democratization of theological system with the

Church providing funds and equipment as well as minimum control over theological education.

The Church can also provide general guidelines which will, of course, be formulated by people themselves based on their own daily experience and faith. Such an approach to theology will enable Black theologians to realize that beyond racism lies the economic question. The dynamic forces which are operative in the capitalist economic system can be best

understood only when Black theologians interact and listen to the Black labour force. Only when oppressed black masses control and design their theological education and seminaries, can we even begin to talk about the curriculum and philosophy of theological education. But at the heart of all this, is the economic question, without which, our theology is bound to be wide off the mark. Thus our theological reflection will fizzle out and die before we start.