

Following the Trail of Suffering: Black Theological Perspectives, Past and Present

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I. INTRODUCTION

The people of South Africa live during difficult times when crucial decisions have to be made. With the state of emergency widened to embrace the entire black South Africa (there are no signs of it in white towns) there is no doubt any more that there is a great measure of intransigence and desperation on the part of the white state. Large scale indiscriminate detentions of black leaders and activists of all ages; the tear gassing of people in churches and at funeral services and the brutal shootings of unarmed school children provide irrefutable concrete evidence of this intransigence and desperation. The entire black South Africa has been forced to retreat to a low level of resistance because of increasing and deepening repression and harassment. This situation of crisis has brought black politicians, economists, social scientists, religious leaders and theologians who are in prison as well as those who are still outside, to a tactical stop. They had to stop and review the situation of stalemate and search for new and more meaningful answers to pertinent questions which are posed by it and devise new strategies of advancing the cause of liberation.

The present setback which we are experiencing in our exodus is also an

opportunity that cannot be missed. It is a setback in that what appeared a year ago as an unstoppable thrust to bring about the emergence of a new future and the birth of a new nation has been abruptly and ruthlessly intercepted. While it is a lamentable setback, it is one that can and has to be converted into an opportunity which if properly and carefully utilized, can benefit the struggle for liberation. The state of emergency is for black people, an epistemological moment to which all thought and language have come. It is not certain anymore that old theological language and communal activity will continue to be the best ways of expressing the presence of God among the oppressed in the most effective manner in and beyond the present state of emergency. It is not certain anymore that this language which used to kindle the light of hope and the fire of active faith in the oppressed will continue to be the most effective witness to God as God continues to bring down opposition to God's sovereignty and to the liberation of God's oppressed creation. It is also not certain anymore that this theological language which we now use will continue through the entire state of emergency to give appropriate expression to and even inspire new "emergency" responses of black people to God's

command to engage in a radical discipleship in pursuance of justice and liberation.

It is therefore imperative that in our attempt to be theologically vigilant and our continuing obligation to test and reconcile black concrete discipleship with verbal articulation of that discipleship we should grab the epistemological moment which has been forced upon the black theological community and struggle. While standing firmly in the present, we have to re-examine the past in order to fashion a better and more crisp and sharp theological language that can cut open the door to a future of liberation for black people of South Africa.

II. LIGHT ON METHODOLOGY IN BLACK THEOLOGY

From 1978 when, according to S Biko, "essentially the black community is a very religious community, which often reflects on being, in other words, what is my purpose in life, why am I here, who am I"?' going through 1980 when Bonganjalo Goba stated that "... black theological reflection as a communal praxis cannot be separated from the ongoing commitment to political change in South Africa"² to 1986 when Itumeleng Mosala asserts that Black Theology has to be a theoretical weapon of struggle in the hands of the exploited black masses,³ this theology has always been a theology of praxis which emerged in the heat of the historical struggles of black Christian workers and peasants and has always retained that base. Initially, however, the link with this praxis was not pro-

nounced and vivid because black praxis had not yet evolved into a deliberately organized historical project. But as soon as the South African Student Organization (SASO) and the Black People's Convention (BPC) launched the earliest concrete social projects for purposes of economic upliftment and psychological liberation under the banner of Black Consciousness, this important methodological link became explicit and visible. It immediately had a direct and forceful impact on the determination and arrangement of theological themes in order of priority. In fact Black Theology, as a theological articulation of Black consciousness in the religious realm became one of the many projects of conscientization. It continues to play an important role in the ideological formation of the black political agents. This is evidenced by the successful leadership of archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr Alan Boesak and other black pastors.

This complex relationship was misunderstood by white theologians who wrongly attempted to link Black Theology with some European theologies in order to acquire the right of placing it on their agenda in the arena of their struggle for orthodoxy⁴.

The blame can as a matter of fact not be put entirely on the acquisitive instinct of European and other Western theologians. Black Theologians in South Africa are also to blame. They did not make the distinction between their theology and others sufficiently clear. They also continued to use dominant theological categories

1. Biko S 'statement made in court during the SASO-BPC trial' as quoted by A Millard. See his "Testimony of Steve Biko" New York: Panther Books, Granada Publishing, 1979 p 94.

2. Goba B "Doing Theology in South Africa: A Black Christian Perspective" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, June 1980, p 25ff.

3. Mosala I J "The use of the Bible in Black Theology" in I J Mosala and B Tlhagale (eds): *The Unquestionable Right to be Free* Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1986 p 175ff.

4. See Bosch D "Currents and crosscurrents in South African Black Theology" in G S Gilmore and J H Cone (eds.): *Black Theology, a Documentary History, 1966-1979*, New York, Orbis Books, 1979 p 233ff.

which are household categories in european theology without even explaining the difference that emerges when the same categories are used in their theology. Neither did they make a total break epistemologically with european theology. They continued to be dependent on it for a long time and thereby opened their theology for european theological meddling, long before they were ready to deal with critique from outside.

James Cone, a black American theologian, was very clear from the very beginning that he was not satisfied with euro-american theology and that he was attempting to leave it behind him. His *A Black Theology of Liberation* is evidence of this noble effort. In that way other black theologians who shared the same concern could come in and say whether he had succeeded in his goal or not. This is how G Wilmore and C Cone came into this debate and assisted J Cone through their critique to go further and complete the epistemological break which he had initiated and make a real new beginning for Black Theology.⁵

It was the case on the issue of the identity of Black Theology. Wilmore asked for factors that made black theology black and thus distinguished it from white theology. He pushed Cone to get to the basic issue of the sources and the norm, which is what determines the identity, content and methodology of a theology.

In the above mentioned book J Cone can be seen vigorously grappling with the theological constructions of K Barth, P Tillich and to a lesser extent that of R Niebhur. He criticizes some parts of their theology in the light of

the social challenges and theological needs of the black community and appropriates some of its useful methodological elements. In that way Cone released himself from the grip of euro-american theology and went further in his development of Black Theology, as it is evident in his book, *God of the Oppressed* especially.

South Africa black theologians were not so fortunate in that regard. They did not have a Wilmore at that very early and crucial stage of the development of their black theology. Consequently their theology suffered from a lack of selfcritique which did not last very long as we can see from the present debates among black theologians in South Africa.

When most black theologians focused as a matter of priority their entire attention on the black community and its praxis as sources of material for reflection, and neglected public methodological debates, B Goba plunged into these debates in which he was later joined by I Mosala and B Tlhagale who lifted the debate to a higher level. At a time when the acting subject in the struggle for liberation was not yet clearly identifiable in group or class terms B Goba, M Buthelezi, D Tutu and others, consistently identified the entire black community as the acting subject of its liberation.⁶ It was only later when black trade unions for both men and women made a forceful appearance on the labour scene and took their rightful place at the forefront of the fierce battle for a society of unshackled people that Mosala and B Tlhagale identified our interlocutor as the black workers.⁷ It is necessary to say that this change of the

5. See G S Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* New York, Anchor Books 1973 p 295f. Also see Cone's *God of the Oppressed* Seabury Press, New York, 1975 p 252f; also see Cone's *My Soul Looks Back* (Abingdon, Nashville, 1982) p 82.

6. See Mokgethi Motlhabi (ed.): *Essays on Black Theology*, Johannesburg, U.C.M. 1972.

7. See B Tlhagale's "Towards a Black Theology of Labour" in C Villa-Vicencio and J W De Gruchy (eds): *Resistance and Hope* David Philip: Cape Town, 1985 p 126ff.

identity of the acting subject did not imply disillusionment with or a rejection of the black community. It was a necessary deepening of the concept "black community" whereby this community is named in relation to the primary activity – economic activity – that determines its oppression and also serves as a trustworthy criterion of national liberation. Black people have been dispossessed of their land which is the basic means of all production and subsistence as well as a source of power. They have been turned into dispossessed workers whose only possession is their labour power. By identifying black people as workers these theologians have lifted our struggle beyond civil rights to human rights, from an exclusive struggle against racism to a social and national revolution.

This deepening in the identifying of the black interlocutor is very important for black theology. It introduces theology into the area of the material basis of theology which has been rather largely neglected by euro-american theologians in favour of spiritualization. This is to my mind, an important theological deepening and corrective.

Recent publications by our american brothers and sisters also show evidence of a further development in this area.⁸ In the earlier stages of the development of their version of black theology the interlocutor was the black community as an undelineated whole. The acute and urgent problem was racism as it affected the entire black community and as it permeates the entire fabric of american society. This

viewpoint was carried forward into international theological dialogues, especially into the dialogue with Latin American theologians where it was presented forcefully by Cone and Wilmore among others. Latin Americans on their part approached theology from the class paradigm and also forcefully presented class as the determinant in society.⁹

In the ensuing difficult debate that took long before positions softened, both sides acceded to the point made by the other side. Black theologians recognized that racism is not the sole problem facing blacks and that capitalism posed a serious problem and that it has to be addressed theologically, combated socially as well as politically and eradicated simultaneously with racism. What is important for us at this stage of our discussion is that in addition to convincingly presenting the painful concrete issue of racism and acknowledging that the latin americans had a point about capitalism, Black americans also addressed the issues of religion of the oppressed as well as the culture of the oppressed within the framework of marxism. They pointed out that these two areas are the achilles' heel of marxism.¹⁰ In fact as far as religion is concerned, marxism generally regards it a negative factor in the life of oppressed people, i.e. as an ideological instrument that is used by the dominant classes against the dominated classes. And as we all can attest from our own experience as well as that of many people in our black communities, this is not completely true. Oppressed black people continuously remold

8. See C West: *Prophesy Deliverance*: Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1982, Cone's *My Soul looks back*; also see Frances Beale's "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*.

9. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (eds.): *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*-New York, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1981.

10. See especially Cornel West's paper in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*. Also see Cone's *Arguments in My Soul Looks Back* as well as in *For my people*.

religious ideas which are imposed upon them and produce a religion that is capable of functioning as a defensive as well as combative ideological weapon.¹¹

This position is based, as we know, on the marxian principle that dominant ideas in every society are the ideas of the dominant class. This leads to ignoring ideas of the oppressed or relegating them to a position of insignificance in that entire society even among the dominated classes thus clearing the field for dominant ideas to dominate unchallenged. The experience of the oppressed is that their ideas, in the present case their dominated religion, continues to survive and play a sustaining role as well as that of contesting the hegemony of the religion of the dominant classes.

(So far the Italian communist party is the only marxist party that has acknowledged the positive role of religion especially the religion of the oppressed.)

The implication of the above for black social analysts is that black theologians and other social analysts should not rely exclusively on marxism in their attempt to understand their predicament in a capitalist and racist world. They have to find within their own cultural heritage other tools which will be used complementarily with marxism.

This is a lesson which is very important for South African black theologians because there is a significant section of the oppressed in South Africa today that insists on the validity of the orthodox marxian assertion that race is not a co-determinant of oppression of black people. Those who hold that view are bound to ignore the culture

and religion of black people in their search for weapons of struggle.

The redefinition of the identity of the black community also coincided with a new issue on the agenda – women's oppression and their struggle against it. Black Theology had up to that point not addressed it and for this gross neglect black theologians have to hang their heads in shame and ask for God's forgiveness and that of our mothers and sisters.

All attention had up to that point focussed entirely on national issues in which black people as a group stand over and against white people, white economy and the white state. Many black women, especially at a time when they too were in the forefront of the battle facing the wrath of the army and the police and suffering equally if not more, demanded the issue of their subservient position during times of relative peace to be addressed. The entire black community, especially men, were challenged to widen and deepen sanctificatory processes within itself and practice internal justice and distribute power to effect equality in order to enhance the external thrust of communal praxis and theology in combat against oppressive forms of white theology. Black women who have tasted equality in battle, in suffering and in victory are not prepared to return to their former status in the community and at home after combat or when the struggle is over. They called for internal dialogue to redress this situation so that the gains of their struggle would not be lost.¹²

The church and theology have not escaped from this justifiable critique. It is indeed true that black women constitute the largest group in the church

11. I J Mosala's "African Independent Churches: a study in socio-theological protest" in *Resistance and Hope*.

12. Bernadette Mosala's "Black Theology and the Struggle of the Black Woman in South Africa" in *The Unquestionable Right to be Free* is along these lines.

and also that they provide the material means for the survival of the church. But paradoxically, they are the objects of a male created, monitored and imposed power structure and theology. Women are in most cases, not allowed to exercise power in the church wherein they are almost the sole audience and activists, be it political, religious, financial or theological power.

They are allocated some space yes, but it is space at some remote corner and not at the center stage of the church. That remote corner is the only space they are allowed to use for articulation of their own theology, a theology which they create in response to the challenges which face them specifically as well as those which face their families and community.

Black women in South African churches are starting to stand up against this exclusion in church and theology. They have started to articulate their theological thoughts and demand an audience and dialogue.

As we are all aware and have come to accept, doing a relevant theology demands a rigorous analysis of society. This is the area in which the overwhelming majority of black women in South African churches are in my opinion not yet well grounded. And this is the area in which black american women are well developed. They can therefore be of great assistance to black South African women, church women and theologians.

As we have stated above, the advance to which we are referring is in the area of analysis of society and that determines the questions and priorities for the theological agenda. We have noticed that black female theolo-

gians in the U.S. distinguish their predicament from that of white women. This is because of the peculiar way in which racism operates in a capitalist society. It leads to more suffering for black women in society. On the other side, capitalism in a racist society favours white women and exploits black women together with black men as well as the entire black community.

This understanding of their society has led to a development of black theology from a feminist perspective which is different and separate from white feminist theology.¹³ Its agenda is also different from that of white feminist theology because black women stand in the black community and the black church. They are not undistinguishable members of american society and church. This is what most black South African women of the church still have to learn, accept and defend. Since feminist theology came to South Africa wearing a white garb and was introduced by white feminist theologians at a time when the black consciousness perspective had lost ground to the so called progressive democratic perspective, women's theological reflection is also being dominated by the dominant perspective and the questions and priorities of white society and the white church. Black questions take a back seat as a result.

The social developments in South Africa have inevitably led to a greater appreciation of the value of social sciences and their analytical usefulness in bringing clarity to an often muddy and confusing situation. Calls in this regard were repeatedly made by Goba in the past and are presently renewed by Tlhagale and Mosala. They loudly call for a search for an appropriate

13. See the articles by Frances Beale, Jacqueline Grant, Theresa Hoover, Pauli Murray and Alice Walker in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*.

biblical hermeneutic which would deal with these new issues satisfactorily. It is especially Mosala's timely critique of Black Theology on its failure to become the property of the masses that really hurt. Black Theology, he said fairly recently quoting K Marx, "... has not yet become a material force because it has not gripped the masses".¹⁴ He called for a new way of going about with the biblical text, a way that will enable the hidden and silenced but struggling oppressed people in biblical communities to become visible, and to break their silence and speak up clearly and loud enough to be heard by the equally silenced black people today as they stand up to demand God's justice and liberation. As history shows, radical calls of this nature are not readily heard or speedily responded to. Black theologians in South Africa are, however, slowly responding and in their struggle to read Scripture in the light of the perspective of the black working people as their loyal "organic intellectuals" they are amazed at the dynamite that lies hidden deep in the bowels of the scriptural text. It will, however, take some time before the results of this new effort reach the international theological market in large consignments.

Inevitably, the above hermeneutical question raises again a related issue which, we thought, had been adequately dealt with and closed in the 1970's by A Boesak, T Mofokeng and others, namely the relationship between scripture and a social praxis which is informed by social sciences, especially by dialectical sociology of

marxian derivation.¹⁵ While Boesak, in his argument with Cone in the 1970's insisted that "the light of the Word of God" is the only final judgement of all action and reflection, other black theologians disagreed and contended that light shines both ways because of the unifying and enlightening presence of Jesus the Messiah in the struggles of faith of both the communities in the biblical text as well as that of the suffering black people of South Africa whose text is being written with their blood.

It's interesting to see that black theologians in the US have also had a similar debate. I'm thinking here of J Cone and Deotis Roberts.¹⁶ In this debate Cone took the position that God is not absent from the life of the oppressed as they struggle in life and as they read the scriptures in the light of their actual concrete actions. And that consequently, that practice is of revelational importance. In other words the light of that practice shines on the scriptural text making certain things in the text perceptible as it does on the practice, improving it qualitatively and driving it forward. Roberts I think, takes the traditional reformed view that light can only shine from the bible, which is the view propounded by Boesak in his first book *Farewell to Innocence*.

I'm of the opinion that, when discussing this matter we should bring the Spirit of God into the picture and ask what the role of the spirit is in the communal practice as the spirit that dwells among those who are occupied with being obedient to Jesus' command of loving their neighbour. If this spirit is

14. Mosala's article entitled "The use of the Bible in Black Theology" in *The unquestionable right to be free* addresses this issue.

15. See Mofokeng T A: *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology*- Kampen, J H Kok, 1983 and Boesak A A : *Farewell to Innocence*- Kampen, J H Kok, 1976.

16. See J Deotis Roberts' *Liberation and Reconciliation*- Westminster Press, Philadelphia and Cone in his *A Black Theology of Liberation*- New York, J B Lippincott, 1970.

God and if this God is, as the bible teaches, involved in that practice in both its concrete and theoretical forms, is it too far-fetched to conclude that spirit brings the two practices together? To put differently, I don't see how and why the spirit of God can be involved in the life and practice of the biblical community of faith as well as in contemporary community of faith and not be involved in bringing the two communities together when the contemporary community desires to dialogue with and learn from their predecessors. I think that the God who has promised us his presence continues to use our own practice to enlighten our reading of the scriptural text. I would therefore agree with Cone on this matter.

For those who would fear contemporary textual domination of the biblical text and would want to protect it, I would say that we should emphasize the dynamic character and nature of the spirit of God in the community of faith. God's spirit cannot be held hostage or prisoner in the practice or life of the contemporary community just as this spirit could not be imprisoned in the biblical communities. The bible witnesses to many occasions and situations where people or communities were abandoned by God and from whom the spirit of God deserted. The spirit of God is free and frees.

Coupled with the above issue is the closely related one of the "authority" of scripture as a whole which especially Mosala addresses very provocatively and posing very pertinent questions. According to him, too many black theologians still approach the text with awe as the "Word of God"

and consequently use, uncritically, texts which can have no other impact than that of frustrating the total liberation of black people.¹⁷ This mystification of the text still stands in the way of its rationally and liberating reading and appropriation. It hides the class struggles which were going on in biblical communities of which the biblical text reports. It also hides the fact that the text itself is a product of such struggles, one that has to be approached with great analytical care lest black theologians make wrong textual connections.

Unfortunately we can only report that not many of our theologians, especially biblical scholars, have entered this discussion. It is therefore not evident whether this proposed approach will make Black Theology grip the black Christian masses and enhance their faith as well as stimulate and radicalize their struggle for justice and liberation.

Black american theologians approach the scriptural text from within the black church and read it using all the available reading tools from within this church. This is important because it is this church or christians within it who read that text and have to be helped to understand it better or go further with it. So far evidence has shown that this community has always read this text in such a way that it contributed to their struggle to survive in a society which militated against the life of black people and denied their humanity. Their reading has even encouraged them to engage, as Wilmore has shown so clearly in his *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, in different acts of rebellion in the past

17. See *The Use of the Bible in Black Theology*. See Cone's *God of the Oppressed* and also J Deotis Roberts' *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*- The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1980.

and present. There was therefore no general opiating influence of the bible evident.¹⁸

But since many black people who belong to the working class and are aware of their class position and class interests have to be reached with the biblical text, it remains a question whether they can be reached and impressed with the traditional reading of this text. I have my doubts. I would suspect that they would rather prefer to read it in such a way that they would hear it is addressing their working class problems which are not absolutely identical with those of the black community per se. If that be the case, then black american theologians will benefit something from engaging in the dialogue which Mosala is calling for.

III. DEEPENING THE SOURCES

Right from the inception of contemporary Black Theology the definition of the concept "black" has been problematic. While there was unanimity right at the beginning that all the oppressed black people of South Africa i.e. Africans, Coloureds and Indians – are black people, the same cannot be said regarding inclusion of black culture, black history and African traditional religion in Black Theology as formative factors. M Buthelezi explicitly and emphatically talked about the culture of blacks having been totally destroyed – and was followed by A Boesak in that he excluded it in his first book while including black history. S Biko on the other hand firmly held that black culture had only been severely damaged but not totally

erased from the memory of the oppressed as well as removed from their daily lives.¹⁹ Many theologians including those who contributed towards the publication "A relevant theology for Africa" concurred with him on this.²⁰ At the end one was confronted by two parallel streams in our black theological thinking which still persist despite slight narrowing lately. Many black theologians of the former persuasion have come to acknowledge the pervasiveness of black culture as well as recognize the importance of black history for Black Theology. Those who were first in regarding black culture as important were already sifting through it to distinguish useful elements from those which, if displayed to whites, wrongly give an impression of our readiness to submit to white oppression. Others were searching for cultural parallels with the culture of the Hebrew people of the Old as well as New Testament and identifying concepts like "corporate personality" and "solidarity" which are central to African and Hebrew perception of being human. S Maimela even explored the contribution which an African concept of salvation can make towards Christianity in general and to theology in particular.²¹

The case of African traditional religions was more difficult especially as found in the African Independent Churches – the principal religious custodians of African culture and traditional religion. Some students in SASO during the early days of the black consciousness movement were rightly very critical of the African Independent Churches for their apolit-

18. See G S Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

19. See *Farewell to Innocence* for Boesak's position and *Essays on Black Theology* for that of M Buthelezi. S Biko's position on this issue comes out clearly in his "Black Consciousness and the quest for true humanity" in *Essays on Black Theology*.

20. See Hans-Jurgen Becken (ed): *Relevant Theology for Africa* - Durban, Lutheran Pub. House, 1973.

21. S S Maimela: "Salvation in African Traditional Religions" in *Missionalia* Vol. 13, No 2, August 1985.

ical stance which significantly reduced the numbers of black Christians in the forefront of the struggle. They subsequently advocated the total eradication of these churches, a task which would have been impossible given their relatedness to the black working class and working class conditions that still exist. The situation has fortunately changed, though not significantly. Notwithstanding persistent criticism of these churches' intolerable neutrality which is tantamount to support of the racist state, there is an increasing understanding among a significant number of black theologians of these churches and appreciation of their positive role in enabling the lowest in the black community to at least absorb the sting of oppression and survive.²² We therefore anticipate an increase in research interest in this area of church activity as well as dialogue with theologians and religious leaders of these churches on the part of black theologians. One can only caution that this new appreciation should not lead to idealization of these churches. They still have great problems like all the historic churches.

As we all know, the areas of African culture, history and traditional religions have been both areas of unhappy separation as well as possible bases of Pan African dialogue, co-operation and unification of black people in the world. In the 1970's there was unfortunately less success in the dialogue which went on between Afro-Americans and many Africans who took part in it. While G Wilmore and J Cone tried hard to bridge the differences by pointing at areas of possible common interest and cross fertilization, J Mbiti on the African side seemed irrevoca-

bly bent on widening the gap by stressing the differences between these theologies at the expense of commonalities.²³ It was not until Bishop Desmond Tutu entered this discussion as an African and a black person i.e. as one who combines in his life and thought African culture and politico-economic commitment on the African continent, that prospects for Pan-Africanism in theology improved. Since that intervention by a black South African, many of his countrymen have joined the discussion and more African theologians in free Africa accept the validity of the critique made by J Cone that African theology is impoverished by neglect of socio-political issues. We are thinking here of people like J Chipenda Kwesi Dickson and Jean Marc Ela. This shows the key strategic position in which our situation of oppression and our struggle have put South African black theologians in regard to this Pan-African theological dialogue. It remains to be seen whether we will live up to the challenges that face us and use opportunities which are open to us.

In their own appropriation of African culture, history and traditional religion as formative factors some black theologians in South Africa are going further and consistently apply class analysis on them in order to eliminate their negative elements and discover positive ones. This they do not withstanding recognition of weakness of marxism on issues of culture and religion. Mosala asserts for instance, regarding culture and black theology, that "for this reason the task of a black theology of liberation is, amongst other things, to identify the

22. See I J Mosala "The Relevance of African Traditional Religions and their relevance to Black Theology" in *The unquestionable right to be Free*.

23. See Sergio Torres and Kofi Appiah-Kubi (eds.): *African Theology en Route* - Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1978. See Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* and Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance*.

distinctive forms of working class culture and use them as a basis for developing theological strategies of liberation". When doing that we should search in the past struggles of our working people how this culture informed and transformed their struggles so that we can deal critically with their contemporary culture. It is necessary to do that because as Marx says, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". We should therefore investigate the cultural history of the struggling classes and learn from it. This is how Cornel West and J Cone deal with black culture in the U.S.²³

As far as African history is concerned, I am of the opinion that while we accept the symbolic importance of certain African personalities of the past as bearers of the tradition of struggle against oppression in its many different manifestations we should dig deeper and unearth the real bearers of those struggles, the lowest men, women and children in our African societies of the past and be informed by them in our reading of scripture and subsequent formulation of black theology. We should not get stuck in valorization of African feudal kings especially in present day South Africa where most of their descendents are being co-opted into the apartheid system and are consequently a serious distortion of the history of their forebears.

As far as African traditional religion is concerned, as it is practised inside as well as outside of the African Independent Churches, we should be very careful especially now. Too many missionaries and former missionaries who were actually denying the validity of these religions and actively cam-

paigned against them are now glorifying them. In the past they tried hard to elicit black support in their campaign to eradicate these religions, now they are again asking for black support for the rehabilitation of these religions. This we should not do. Instead we should follow our own path and critically appropriate only those elements which appeal to and sustain the black poor and most powerless in their struggle for survival. These we should consider incorporating in black theology.

IV. DOMINANT THEMES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Racist oppression and capitalist dispossession of blacks in South Africa has always undergone a historical development and manifested itself differently during different historical periods. This happened, of course, in such a way that the suffering of our people broadened and worsened progressively. Not only men and women became the victims but old people and babies as well. The different official names which were used to refer to the indigenous people reflect this. They were initially called kaffirs, then natives, later bantu and now Blacks (with a truncated connotation). They worked hard to create an appropriate psychological resistance among blacks and also made necessary adjustments to means of resistance, continually evolved new strategies in order to be more effective in such worsening conditions. Since assault on blacks was not limited to the economic, social and physical areas but extended to include ideological manipulation which took – among many forms – a theological one, black Christians, pastors and theologians were called upon to

24. See C West's *Prophecy Deliverance*.

respond theologically to counteract and restrict mental damage on black christians. They had to join hands with black sociologists, economists, psychologists and other scientists.

In the field of Black Theology it is evident that the selection of themes and determination of priorities was related to the historical development of objective conditions as well as the subjective state of christian faith of the oppressed. At no point in time did Black Theology follow the european and white American agenda because it was part of the problem. That would not have helped to build theological resistance against further corrosion of the mind of the oppressed. And as S Biko aptly put it "the mind of the oppressed is the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor". To deprive the oppressor of this precious mind Black theology had to determine its independent agenda which more often than not, contradicts that of most white theologians.

In the actual systematic development of Black theology two poles of reference stand out: the Exodus and the praxis of Jesus, the Messiah (Christology). Much of the earlier black theology revolves around them as events that provide a powerful paradigm of liberation. In both cases the notion of history which is generally insufficiently dealt with, if not totally neglected by traditional white theology, is regarded as very important. A historical approach to those events brings out their dynamic theological character. All the different theological concepts which are dealt with – creation, liberation, justice, reconciliation etc. are defrozen and injected with a dose of historicity by a people for whom history and time had stood still until they decided to move them. Black people have been

awakened to regard "the world as history in the making" and themselves as active participants in its making and moulding. To them history is not simply harmonious but conflictual as well because of inherent contradictions and antagonism among blacks and whites. It is dialectical and stumbles through moments of harmony and conflict in its forward movement. In opposition to a notion of history which moves independently of the human agency, with God alone in action, a notion that creates passivity among the oppressed who cannot wait an extra day longer for change, black theologians emphasize black people's agency as co-workers with God. They work with God in the historical destruction of structures, institutions and attitudes that make acquisition of life and dignity by black people impossible. Black christians – men and women, young and old – are shown biblically that they should be on the cutting edge of the struggle to create new structures and institutions which they can use to gain their economic justice, social equality and political empowerment as a people and as individuals. It is their Christian vocation to do this in anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. To stimulate this active discipleship Black Theology emphasizes people's God-given potency for revolutionary action and encourages black people to believe in themselves as well as in their abilities to define, shape and reshape their world and social relationships. It is in connection with these emphases that A Boesak discussed the biblical basis of black power in the middle 1970's and S Maimela does today in the middle of the 1980's. (As things are today in South Africa this notion of black power in various forms – its channeling, direction and utilization will

continue to be emphasized by Black theology.) An understanding of the central position and role of the modern racist state in organizing and utilizing power to foster injustice and violently resist all efforts towards peace makes these emphases imperative.

In this area Cone and Albert Cleage have remained loyal to the earliest positions of black consciousness and black power. When Cone enters dialogue with black marxists he does so without abandoning that position which deals so aptly with racism. He complements it with a paradigm that is capable of dealing better with capitalism. In that way he is strengthened instead of weakened. C West is open to critique in this area.²⁴ For him racism is only responsible for the extra suffering of black people and not for their basic suffering. The tragedy with many black South African theologians and activists is that in a situation in which racism is still rampant and promises to be more so as the struggle heats up they have dumped black consciousness in favour of the more attractive and fashionable orthodox marxian paradigm. They believe that it is more adequate in dealing with both racism and capitalism in spite of the absence of evidence supporting that claim. These groups can learn from the American experience that these two paradigms complement each other and be more open in their dialogue with fellow theologians of the former persuasion.

Black Theology also deals at length as it is evident in the writings of the period around the 1976 Soweto uprisings, with the experience of suffering and death both within the Exodus journey as well as in Christology as the major fountain head of the Christian faith. Since 1976 the cross continues to hang heavily over black South Africa. Institutional resistance (sin) which

violently confronts all followers of the radical prophets and Jesus the black Messiah in the Exodus of black people, results in inconceivable suffering and genocidal killing of our people all over our country. Their suffering through heinous forms of torture, shootings and callous rape of our school children is related to the suffering of Jesus and his death at the hands of the state that acted in the name of the economically, politically and religiously powerful. As early as 1974 the endless killing of so many young people before their time, let alone the invisible internal bleeding of millions of our people as a result of economic and psychological torture, already constituted a crucial theological problem for M Buthelezi. Dying in the path of a radical discipleship was made even more of a problem because there was then no visible convincing sign that the wall of apartheid was cracking. Instead it was toughening and thickening day by day, making it imperative for theology to descend deeper and deeper into the dark mysteries of the suffering and death of Jesus in search for the presence of God and his promises for our people. Black theology cannot but continue to search for the christological meaning of their suffering and death because their innocent blood continues to scream to God for justice like the blood of Abel. Within the South African valley of death of innocent black children who try to do God's will by following in the footsteps of Jesus the Messiah, Black Theology is bound to stand with both feet. It will have to seriously explore in this overshadowing atmosphere of death and despair a new and meaningful way of understanding and articulating the faith of a resurrection that denies death a word of finality in the world. Black Theology owes this to the black departed,

living and unborn whose history is characterized by death and the absence of God. The power of resurrection which is produced from the tomb

of Jesus is desperately needed to break the umbilical cord of racist oppression that ties black people to the South African inferno.