

SEARCH FOR LIBERATING ETHICS: RESPONSE TO GOBA

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The formulation of this topic exhibits two important key words: a search and liberating ethics. The Penguin Concise English Dictionary defines the word search as an "act of examining thoroughly or seeking in many places; prolonged attempt to find something lost or hidden."¹ Implicit in this definition is the idea that searching is an activity that requires astuteness, diligence and intellectual discernment. A search is necessary where something precious is lost or hidden. What is it that we have lost or is hidden from us, it may be asked? The organisers of this conference clearly identified the need for liberating ethics as that which has not been adequately articulated in the Black community. Liberating ethics is deemed essential because of the status quo domesticating or oppressive ethics which legitimises reform politics, rather than a complete destruction of apartheid, as morally tenable.

Given the socio-political deformation in South Africa, accompanied by state orchestrated violence in the townships aimed at destabilising the Black community and politically demoralising them, the need to discover and appropriate an ethic of struggle that is politically relevant and theologically justifiable is critically important. Arguably, liberating ethics is essentially an ethic of struggle. Cone connects liberation and struggle when he says,

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¹G. N. Gammansway, The Penguin Concise English Dictionary: The One-Volume Reference Book of the English Language, (London: Bloomsbury Books, 1969), p. 652.

"liberation is a reality to be created and define in the struggle."² If liberation is born in the heat and tumble of the struggle for life, so also, liberating ethics forms both tactical and strategic decisions of the oppressed, "engaged in the life or death struggle."³ For this reason a quest for this type of ethics should be the task of every organic ethicists (rooted in the daily struggles of the community to be free) who strives to provide a sound moral ground upon which the struggle for freedom and justice could be pursued and intensified. Most importantly, an ethic of struggle is not a one time activity. That is to say, it is not something we do once and for all. It is an ongoing activity tested and purified in the heat of the struggle itself.

PRAXIS AND SOURCES OF ETHICS OF STRUGGLE?

Before identifying some sources of the ethics of struggle, it would be helpful to note that the ethic of struggle focuses on human political activity. That is to say, it reflects on the practical liberational action of the oppressed. It asks probing questions in relation to the struggle. Where are we in the struggle? What have we achieved or not achieved? This means that appropriate liberational strategies are born in the process of deliberation informed by the nature of the struggle, enabling us to make strategic choices. Paris writes, "morality is expressive of the capacity to determine the quality of human activity by making choices in accordance with understanding of the goals of bad, right and wrong."⁴

What Paris does not show is that the goals of right and wrong are not necessarily objective or bias free criteria, that these criteria are determined, coloured and tinted by one's social location, and one's material self-interest. Further, it is essential to develop a critical

²James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 211.

³Ibid.

⁴Peter J. Paris, The Social Teaching of the Black Churches, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 60.

moral discernment that empowers the oppressed to unmask the status quo's ethical fallacies or what Cone calls the ethics of white injustice: deceptive morality. For example, during the Mass Action campaign the minister of constitutional affairs castigated the ANC for embarking on Mass Action as morally unacceptable. By that he meant that Mass Action had no moral basis. The question, however, is whose morality was he talking about? Obviously, he was talking about the status quo morality. If resistance against injustice and oppression has no moral base, then injustice and oppression have. It is at the level of competing political claims that an ethic of struggle is most essential. In South Africa two sets of ethics exist side by side: the dominant ethics of the oppressor and the ethics of the oppressed. These types of ethical thought cannot both be authentic. The latter is closer to truth than the former for it seeks to justify and actualise human liberation.

Further, the ethic of law and order deserve our rigorous attention in the struggle. The **Kairos Document** takes issue with status quo moralising which gives the unjust law a semblance of credibility. Unjust law and order have to be resisted at all cost. The resistance is based on the moral ground that put the primacy of justice rather than law. That is say, our starting point is that justice has been violated and where this has happened one cannot appeal to law and order for these are rendered insignificant where justice is at stake. Clearly, law and order as we have it in this country is predicated on fox justice. Weaving the Black American folklore material in his liberational discourse, Cone writes, "Sis Goose demanded fair (rational) trial from Br'er Fox but only found "fox justice," because all in the courthouse were foxes. To which black people concluded! "Now my chilluns, listen to me, when all de folks in the cotehouse is foxes , and you is des'er common goose, der ain't gwine to be much jestice for you pore collud folks."⁵

This citation helps ethicists engaged in the search for liberating ethics to analyse human behaviour. In addition, it alerts us that our quest for land, liberation, justice and democracy will not be handed over to us on silver platter from the foxes' courthouse, but from

⁵Quoted in James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, p. 204.

the courthouse of human struggle. Foxes established courts in which to protect themselves against legitimate legal claims of the oppressed persons for stealing the indigenous people's land and murder of the innocent people in the name of their law and order.

Furthermore, the tale locates the source or genesis of a liberating ethics in the stories of the oppressed community. That is to say, it considers the black experience as an informative resource for liberation thought. The category of foxes and geese is a reality that we cannot avoid. We may not agree about the nature of fox justice depending where we stand in relation to fox political structures, but the common reality is that we are oppressed by the unjust structures; this should form the basis for common cooperative political activity.

An authentic ethic of liberation informed by the depth of the community's struggle requires a moral vision sufficient enough to enable the victims to work together irrespective of their religious or ideological differences. Advisedly, Cone says, the difference among blacks should not be "permitted to weaken the struggle."⁶ Equally convincing are Malcom X's insightful words:

"What you and I need to do is to forget our differences. When you come together, we don't come together, we don't come together as Baptists or Methodists. You don't catch hell because you're a Methodist or Baptist, you don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican, you don't catch hell because you're a Mason or an Elk, and you sure don't catch hell because you're an American; because if you were an American, you wouldn't catch hell. You catch hell because you are black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell for the same reasons."⁷

⁶James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, p. 215.

⁷Malcom X Speaks, (New York: Groove Press, 1966), p. 4.

Malcom dismisses all the reasons we often put forward, regarding why we are oppressed and exploited. Suffering and genocide against blacks, Malcom argues, has nothing to do with our different religious or political affiliations, but rather, it has all to do with the fact that we are black persons. For this reason, a liberating ethic "arises out of love, for ourselves and for humanity. This is an essential ingredient of liberation without which the struggle turns into a denial of what divine liberation means."⁸

Essentially, three elements form the basis of the ethic of struggle: first that God wills for human liberation (Lk.4:16ff); second, love for ourselves and for humanity; and third, moral transcendence on our part to values that are meant to destroy us. Of the three elements the most important one is the "love for ourselves and humanity." In a casual discussion, one thinker raised the issue of black love as the single minded commitment of Black theology. He said, if you don't love black people you won't do Black theology. Who can love or identify himself/herself with a people that have been despised, marginalised and often slaughtered like cattle? Similarly, no one can actively engage in an ethic of struggle if one does not love the black community. Therefore to engage in an ethic of struggle is deliberate political choice.

An ethic of struggle is not simply knowing or be morally convinced that the struggle is tenable or merely citing biblical verses in support of it. In effect, it means that political actors in the struggle should discern the significance of what Paris calls, "constructive analytical and critical thought with respect to political purpose, effective strategy and realizable goal."⁹ That means that good ethical thought and action "necessitate the concentrated effort of many people thinking and acting cooperatively and constructively in a sustained manner."¹⁰

⁸James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, p. 217.

⁹Peter Paris, The Social Teaching of the Black Church, p. 91.

¹⁰Ibid.

Lack of discernment concerning the importance of thought and action based on an informed social analysis would render a liberating ethic ineffective.

PEOPLE AS THE SUBJECT OF STRUGGLE

In an essay published in the book, **Our Story**, Karenga writes:

"You see, human personality is deformed by the system in which we live. And it is your religious duty, your spiritual duty to struggle against that. Not to wait for a chariot....not to wait for a freak miracle. For you are a miracle. If you don't make a miracle happen, it won't happen. People, in the final analysis, must struggle for a new world."¹¹

Karenga underscores the understanding that people are the subject of struggle. For the oppressed community, freedom is not a formal concept, but rather a full blown experience of liberation from political bondage and conventional relationship, seeking to live out the full implications of that relationship in all aspects of their life together. That full blown experience of freedom is concretised in land. Hence an authentic ethic of struggle should take land as a context of struggle, the acquisition of which spells victory and lasting shalom. Anyone who does not concretise justice and freedom in land reduces these life-giving concepts into mere philosophical abstracts. To talk about an ethic of struggle without connecting it to the struggle for land is to miss the point. Land is the arena of struggle and therefore it is also a context where liberating thought find its most profound expression. That is to say, land and struggle are inextricably bound, as such a liberating ethic seeks to give moral guidance regarding the acquisition of that which Whites stole from the people: land. Once that which was stolen is exhibited and identified, it is morally and legally defensible to demand that it be returned to its legitimate owners. This should also apply to land. We can argue that alienation and

¹¹ Maulana, Karenga, "Struggle and Culture: Toward a National Black Value System," in Akyaaaba, Addai-Sebo and Ansel Wong, ed., Our Story, (London: London Strategic Policy Unit, 1988), p. 222.

lack of sense of belonging on the part of the oppressed is a consequence of apartheid's uprooting praxis. People have been alienated from the land and from themselves. Therefore an ethic of liberation seeks to affirm the humanity of the exiled and alienated from land, as subjects of their own destiny. This means that human beings as moral agents are central to liberating ethics.

APPROPRIATION OF BLACK VALUES

Central to the African ethical thought is the idea of human interdependence crystallised in the dictum "I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am." This way of understanding our life together is gradually being eroded by forces of fragmentation and divide and rule on one hand, and the deforming practice of individualism on the other. These forces have made it impossible for the oppressed to act together on political issues. Rivalry and enmity exist among liberation movements to such an extent that they find it easier to speak to the enemy/oppressor, rather than among themselves. At this critical juncture, a liberating ethic should enable the black community and liberation movements to appropriate the fundamental principle of human interdependence in political life. As Karenga poignantly states:

"I am because of you. If I am weak, it is because of you, if I am strong it's because of you. In a word, I have meaning because of you. If I am a leader it's because of you....I get my essential meaning from you."

We have to realise that we need each other more than any other time in our struggle because our salvation clearly depends on the liberation of the entire black community. This means that we should pick ourselves from the ground, bandage our wounds and dare struggle to victory - a collective victory for the living, the dead and the yet unborn. The forces of death are conspiring against us. An Apartheid Front is being arranged for next month. Why is it that all the efforts toward principled political relationships among blacks are short lived. Is this one example of our God forsakenness or a curse?

One thing is clear in my mind: we should not delude ourselves by thinking that the oppressor has the moral capacity for self-correction without struggle. We have to take our destiny and daily lives into our own hands. The upshot of this understanding is that since "the oppressor is responsible for our enslavement, we are ultimately responsible for our liberation."¹²

Further we should be vigilant enough to know that "no matter what we say about the oppressor, in the final analysis, a people that cannot save itself is lost forever."¹³

Cabral once said that the greatest battle is the battle against ourselves. Regardless of the obstacles that the enemy puts along the road of human liberation, we are our own enemies. This means that knowing an ethic of struggle without commitment to the struggle would not help. We have to deal with our own apathy and contradictions to the best values and the choice we made. A liberating ethic is a political choice to struggle for liberation and high human value. It provides the moral choice for the oppressed to change the course of the history of oppression.

An ethic of liberation proper emphasises human moral agency, encourages free inquiry and guards against every heteromy. This ethic is a product of critical human deliberation. If morality comes from outside, one cannot be blamed or praised for one's actions. Only people who act voluntarily can be blamed or praised for their actions. This brings us to the question of whether or not an act is right because God loves it or God loves an act because it is right. The rightness of an act is not dependent on God but on the goal it serves. Actions that serves the promotion of justice, liberation and justice are judged morally right.

An ethic of liberation has to emerge out of the experience and engagement in the struggle. Since to know God is to do justice, so also to know an ethic of liberation is to do the struggle.

¹²M. Karenga, *ibid.* p. 220

¹³M. Karenga, *ibid.* p. 220.