

# THE FUTURE IMAGE OF SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK THEOLOGY

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Two historical realities explain the nature and style of South African Black Theology. Firstly, the theology of the black church in South Africa is and has always been a theological reflection on the resistance praxis of the black community from the very moment of christianization of African people in our country. It is a passionate effort of black christians who entered the christian church as defeated and dispossessed people. That nature of Black Theology was determined by the fact that the christian faith to which black people were later converted, arrived in South Africa as a bedfellow of the violent process of colonisation. In many cases, it even served as an equal partner in that process whose responsibility was an ideological softening of African resistance.<sup>1</sup> Black christians try today, as they had always done in the past, long before they were christianized, to understand their predicament and fashion their responses to their condition, in the light of the lofty promises of the God of the oppressed, as a God of love and justice.<sup>2</sup> Since the colonial process that determine their existence still persists, their resistance will also continue until it is ended.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the short and long

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1 See Magubane, B.M. 1979: *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*. New York, Monthly Review Press, p.55ff. on the role of education and religion in the colonial process.\*\*

2 See G.M. Setiloane's *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam, A.A.Bakema 1976.) In this book the author argues very passionately but also persuasively for the fact that the Sotho-Tswana has a religious life and practice that was in no way inferior to the Christian faith and that that religion addressed all facets of the life of the people. See also Mbiti, J.S. 1970: *Concepts of God in Africa*. London, S.P.C.K.

3 Some of our liberation movements, e.g. the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (P.A.C) and the Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO) warned since their inception that there is no way in which the South African conflict can be resolved without the colonial question of land dispossession is resolved. Now, many groups of African people who lost their land are coming forward and saying that no election of a constituent assembly can take place before their land is returned to them. many others are not even waiting for the regime and the negotiating parties to adres their demands. They are returning to those tracks of land and taking them back.

term future of their theology will be determined by the nature of this resistance praxis and its impact on black christians and their lives at different moments of its evolvment.

Secondly, the future development of Black Theology will not be divorced from the present nature of that theology as a reflection on a praxis of liberation. Instead, it will be linked in a determinative way, with its present nature as a theology of struggle that reflects on the objective conditions that affect the lives of black people as well as on their subjective responses as a christian black people. Since all projections on the future of our country indicate that there isn't going to be a sudden and immediate radical change in the material conditions that govern the lives of black people in South Africa. In other words, since liberation will not come soon, then it goes without saying that the struggle for recovery of our land, equitable distribution of economic and political power as well as social equality will continue and necessitate the polemical, critical and projective (prophetical) functions of Black Theology to be continued for a long time. In that response, Black theology will be continuing what it is presently doing and also learning from its successes and weaknesses.

If what we stated above will become reality, it is incumbent on us as students of S.A. Black Theology who wish to search for its future image, to follow the evolvment of theological reflection among our people in order to understand the different types of religious and theological responses that emerged among black people in South Africa to which a future Black Theology will be linked and from which it will be learning.

To understand the different types of theology that emerged among the oppressed people of our land in the last 300 years of the most vicious colonial oppression known to humankind, we have to understand the concrete situation and particular events that produced theological questions that occupied the minds of organic theologians of the oppressed during each of the above historical phases. For that purpose, we shall present a very brief summary of that situation in order for us to be able to deal meaningfully with future possible directions for that theology.

Lebamang Sebidi in 'The unquestionable Right to be Free' presents a helpful periodization of the history of the encounter of African people with the messangers of the Bible with which we partially agree and wish to posit as a co-determinant of their various responses.<sup>4</sup> Sebidi delimits three phases of colonial history namely: the tribal era (early colonial era), the early industrial era (later colonial era) and the present apartheid era.<sup>5</sup>

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4 See Mosala I. and Thlagale B. (eds.) 1986: *The Unquestionable Right to be Free*.

5 *Ibid.* p.80.

During the tribal era (early colonial era) i.e. when all Africans still lived on tribal land and in tribal formations, all resistance to colonisation and the colonial religion, namely Western christianity, whether military as it often was, cultural or religious, was conducted on the basis of African Traditional Religion. The tribal priests and doctors were always involved in cultic preparation of the regiments before the latter embarked on a campaign to defend their land. Some rituals were also performed after the return of the fighting forces. Culturally, the elders of the tribes stepped up the tribal school activities (mountain school) where young people were initiated into adulthood in opposition to the church that was also conducting catechism classes whereby young people were initiated into christian adulthood and western culture. Traditional African religion was also attacked by western christianity in an attempt to displace it from its unchallenged hegemonic position. The prophets and priests of that religion were expected to mediate between the ancestors and their humiliated and suffering children, and say what needed to be done for national harmony and equilibrium in nature to be restored. It was also their task to explain the mysteries of nature as well as inform the spirituality of the living.

That religious resistance could not last long because it was soon deprived of its material basis of existence when Africans lost their land, cattle, sheep and goats. This wealth constituted their means of subsistence, self propagation and religiousity. They needed their cattle and sheep for sacrifices and their trees, shrubs and mountains for shrines and temples and these were no longer in their control. In many cases, they had to suffer the humiliation of asking for permission from white racists who dispossessed them, when they wished to go to the graves of their ancestors.<sup>6</sup> When that happened, the way was open for conversion or religious co-optation of many Africans into white christianity or transitional form of christianity (African Independent Christianity) that took place during the second phase of colonial conquest which we shall now discuss.

The second era (around the 19th century) was ushered in by the dispossession of the mineral wealth of our land, (the so-called discoveries of diamond

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6 Africans always return to the place where their people are buried from time to time to commune with those who have departed as well as take their children and those who were not present at the funeral. They also go there whenever there are problems in life to seek the help of the departed. In many cases the African medicine men and women prescribe some ceremonies that include going to talk to the departed in order to restore harmony when they feel that it has been disturbed by the life conduct of the living relatives. When this has to be done and the land is in white hands, Africans, in most cases have to endure great indignities at the hands of the white owner of the land and of the graves of their people who will sometimes say that they should take their bones away and not bother him or loosen the fence around his farm.

and gold), their commercial production and the subsequent urbanization of the rural populations and the breakdown of the tribal and clan cohesion.<sup>7</sup> The imposition of taxation on Africans that could only be paid with money in addition to the loss of land and other means of production to which we have already referred, forced African men at first and women later to abandon their traditional social formations and emigrate to the urban areas where they painfully sold labour to the new money economy that was developing around the mining and related industries. In these circumstances, African labourers who had left their tribal and family networks behind only arrived to become victims of residential racism in the urban setting. Separate ghettos and shack villages were constructed far away from white industrial and residential areas, which were also their work places. Far away from their religious and cultural village settings, they were compelled to create new social networks that went beyond language and clan as means of survival as human beings. As people who were forced out of their cultural and religious milieu, they were driven by the urge for spiritual survival and constant search for sanity in an insane racist society, to create a new religious universe. This search did not, however, take place in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. The white christian missionaries who ironically shared in racist practices of the white colonial population also continued to strive towards the conversion of these newly urbanized Africans to the christian faith as they defined it and as it was practised by the people who had disinherited them.

In this period the response of our people took two different though related forms. Many Africans joined the colonial church in which they remained junior members who were to remain in white tutelage in all institutional matters until very recently. They found themselves in an invidious position wherein they were expected to accept the theology of love for the neighbour who dispossessed them at the barrel of the gun. They were also compelled to accept a theology that teaches that the land belongs to God ( as defined by their conquerors) after their land was conquered by the messengers of that very God. Many others formed independent African churches in which they were the masters and mistresses of their own religious destiny in a period of transition from the rural tribal context to the modern industrial society. In this act of religious selfdetermination they continued to endure many forms

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7 See Cochrane J.1987: *Servants of Power - The Role of the English speaking Churches in South Africa 1903-1930*. Johannesburg, Ravan Press. One of the reasons why the tribal cohesion was destroyed through recruitment for the urban industries, was, in addition to acquiring labour for the emerging industries, to break the military capacities of the tribal formations.

of harassment and discrimination by the white state until the present era.<sup>8</sup> In spite of that discrimination, they continued to develop a theology that synthesized the teachings from our African spirituality as well as those derived from the theology of their conquerors to inform their religion of survival.

These two different forms of christianity (black colonial christianity and Independent christianity) were related by the social conditions of their adherents. They shared a common social space. Their adherents lived precariously as oppressed and exploited labourers in the black townships on the margins of the many white cities in our country. They suffered the same racist humiliation and exclusion from the material wealth which they extracted from their land through blood, sweat and tears. They are subjected to the same inferior education and lack of health facilities. When the violence of the white racist state is unleashed upon black people, it makes no difference whether you share the Nicean Creed and the Chalcedonian Confession with white christians or not. No group is exempted. When it is time to celebrate the graciousness of God and the small signs of the breaking in of a new dawn in their struggle against their common oppression, they hold hands and pray together in a common spirituality. They dance and clap hands to the rhythm of the same African melodies and drum together. The formal parting of ways comes only when the time for Nicea, Chalcedon and many other imposed confessions arrives, forcing them to be orthodox in a denominational way.

This situation in which many black people, especially the lower middle classes that emerged, remained captive to an imposed theology and spirituality of the colonial churches, was terminated by the tragic events of Sharpeville when the hatred that white christians harboured against fellow black christians boiled over and resulted in the brutal killing of 69 unarmed Africans who were protesting the dehumanising practice of carrying the passbook as a badge of black inferiority. That brutal killing of our innocent black people marked the turning point, not only of black protest politics but also of black theological collusion. When the African pastor from one of the white liberal churches, whose task it was to bring the 'good news' from Scripture at the funeral of the victims of Sharpeville, read from the book of Job and said that God had given and God had taken, he was told to leave the funeral and go home. He was told: if you do not know who took, go and ask

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8 The African Independent Churches always had great difficulties acquiring sites where they could build their churches. There are cases where they were under security police surveillance because they were always suspect in the eyes of the regime. The fact that they were free from white tutelage and monitoring has always added to that. In some cases there were attempts to destroy them by killing their members on the part of the army and the police of the racist state. The Bullhoek massacre is a classic example. (See Edgar, R. 1988) for a recent historical presentation of the issue.

the white police who killed these people. That refusal by black lay christians who stood at the cutting edge of the struggle for justice for a long time, to accept that the death of black people was consistent with the will of the God of love and justice, closed the door behind an overt theological enslavement to the theology of those who kept our people in psychological and physical captivity. It also ushered in a new period in the struggle for theological creativity, and self determination among many black theologians who were committed to a radical discipleship in service of the black church and black people in general. In the search for theological authenticity which ensued, the above mentioned two black traditions that had hitherto been alienated from each other, began the long and difficult process of reconciliation and mutual enrichment.<sup>9</sup>

It was, however, not until the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and the radical critique of colonial christianity articulated by Steve Bantu Biko in the late 1960's that the black theological movement was brought to the crossroads. Biko criticised white culture, white historiography, white capitalism, white education and white theology for alienating black people from themselves, their land, their culture, religion and history thereby depriving them of the authentically African resources that they needed in their struggle for freedom and recovery of their ancestral land.<sup>10</sup> He was particularly harsh, and justifiably so, with his critique of the white christian theology for giving universalist answers to universal questions that were not posed by black people thereby alienating them from God and the particularity of their suffering.<sup>11</sup> That all-embracing critique that covered the entire white civilization brought the black church and its theology to the crossroads as I indicated above. In fact many young christians asked whether it was not time for the winds of decolonization that were sweeping through Africa to be accompanied by the hurricane of dechristianization of Africa. As a matter of fact, many of them subsequently took the logical step of bringing the contradiction of espousing the religion of our oppressors to an end. They de-

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9 It is a well known fact that some black pastors were at the forefront of the protest movements in the 1960's. What remains to be done is a research into the influence of the killings of 1960 on their theological thought as articulated in their sermons. No black person taught at a seminary during that time. Seminary teaching, even in cases where black clergy were trained were the preserve of whites. Consequently, the only outlet for their theological thought were their sermons. It is for that reason that we think that the need exists for the sermons of pastors like Mahabane, Mokitimi, E. Tema, L.R.L.Ntoane, E.S. Buti, Makhene and many others who were prominent leaders of our people should be studied.

10 See Moore, B.(ed.)1973: *Black Theology - The South African Voice*. London, Hurst and Co. p.45 on "Black theology and the quest for true humanity".

11 *Ibid.* 47ff.

nounced the christian faith tore up the bible and returned to the faith of our forefathers and mothers while others espoused Marxism because of the belief that that ideology did not contain the same contradictions that are inherent to christianity. For those who remained loyal to the christian faith, it could not be business as usual. Black christians had to acknowledge and face the challenges that were posed by the glaring limitations of western theology and do some thing about that. For them, a theological gauntlet was cast for a theology that would make a difference in the resolve of black people in their struggle for justice and freedom. They had to make a radical break with the theology that had discredited and shamed itself at Sharpeville and other places and occasions. They were prompted to listen to the cry of the oppressed and pick up new questions and search for new answers. They had to summon their creativity and create a new theology that was destined to perform a crucial function of delegitimation of white theology that had blessed the guns and the soldiers of the racist state and the industrial machines of capitalism. It was also their challenge to engage in a critical legitimation of the struggle for liberation to which thousands of our people had committed their lives and show how the God who has always taken sides against evil relates to the decision of our people to take up arms and bear the cross in search of justice and freedom.<sup>12</sup>

In our situation of a radical denial of the humanity of our people which had resulted in the alienation to which we referred on the one hand, and the ruthless capitalist exploitation to which our people are subjected, on the other hand, two challenges which ended up as two directions in Black Theology, suggested themselves. Theologians grappled with the question: What does it mean to be made in the image of God within Black Theology generally and Black Christology in particular. They also had to deal with the alienating effects of industrial capitalism that resulted in the emergence of a highly politicised labour movement that uses Marxism as a tool of understanding this economic system as well as formulating their future social order.<sup>13</sup>

In answering the first question, most black theologians who are culturally African used African culture, African history, African religion as sources together with the Scriptures in search of the all embracing answer that would result in a healthy and well grounded human being who would be co-creator

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12 See M. Buthelezi's article entitled 'Violence and the Cross in South Africa' in the *Journal for Theology in Southern Africa*.(Dec. 1979 p.53ff.

13 Mosala I.J. and Thlagale B. took the lead in the 1980's. See also Hopkins, D.1989: *Black Theology - U.S.A.and South Africa - Politics, Culture and Liberation*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books. on this issue.

with God in relation to nature and historical circumstances. In other words, our blackness, more often used by the oppressor as an instrument of alienation in order to secure our clamour for Eurocentricity, was defined not only in terms of our colour and the negativity of our circumstances but also in terms of the best of our African realities in order to gain the self-confidence and self-love that results from acceptance of the self, the black African self as a gift of God. A conscious process of retrieval of African culture that was gradually being pushed to the margins of the consciousness of black people and social life by the dominant Euro-capitalist culture, ensued. It offered us the characteristic communality of African existence and the centrality of solidarity.<sup>14</sup> We also retrieved our African history especially those unforgettable moments of resistance to colonial attack. The names of the monarchs of the different tribes who were at the forefront of that resistance were lifted up as heroes and symbols that could inflate the depressed ego of the oppressed as a matter of necessity. Even African religions drew the attention of theologians who were brought up to look at them with scorn and contempt as a sign of backwardness.

It will help much to understand that this process of retrieval was not an easy exercise which black theologians could undertake in freedom and without disturbance. That natural task of retrieval was regarded as an act of political subversion by the ideologues and theologians of the apartheid state and consequently attracted harassment and repression at the hands of the white church and the racist state. By the way, it served the purposes of the regime to have our minds and hearts controlled by the white theologians who benefitted from our oppression.<sup>15</sup> You will recall the historic statement that Bantu Biko made on this issue of mental and psychological enslavement. He said: "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed"<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, the regime had initiated the homeland programme that was intended to redefine and thereby falsify the aspirations of the oppressed. A process of retrieval of African culture, history, land and religion was also initiated and encouraged by the regime in its purposes of winning black support for that programme. In other words, when we decided

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<sup>14</sup> During the early years of the Black Consciousness Movement, you could easily identify the adherents of that philosophy by their dashikis, hairstyles, the beard they grew, but most significantly, by their reverting to their African names and dropping of European names which were said to be christian names.

<sup>15</sup> It is significant that the first book on Black Theology in South Africa was written by an arch enemy of that theology, Dr Karl Boshoff who was professor at the University of Pretoria. He went to the U.S.A. to study African American Black Theology in order to come and wage a war against South african Black Theology before it even gained any prominence, knipping it in the bud as it were.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.* p.21.



to leave the Eurocentric terrain that was the domain of the white church and opted for our own African terrain that had been viewed with contempt, the religious and other ideological agents of the white racist regime pursued us and contested us even in our African terrain. They regarded our act of asserting our God given right to become independent acting subjects in history as a dangerous act of disobedience to the God-ordained white paternalism over the children of Ham. Black theologians realized very soon that claiming our Africanness as our response to our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God was going to be an act of struggle that calls for courage and faith in the presence of God among the oppressed.

This intervention by the regime forced those theologians who were committed to a search for humanity within the Afro-centric sphere to avoid a wholesale appropriation of African resources and instead search for a critical norm that would facilitate the process of appropriation. In that search the utilitarian principle became the dominant norm. We always asked in what way a particular cultural, historical and religious heritage advances the struggle against settler-colonial and religious oppression. This is the reason why some black theologians adopted a marxist analytical and appropriative tool that resulted in the choice of the heritage of the most oppressed among the oppressed as the most appropriate also because it has enabled the poorest and the most oppressed to survive the vicious attack on their humanity.<sup>17</sup> Many others followed Amilcar Cabral's elevation of the culture of liberation as the appropriate culture that has to inform a theology of the oppressed.

In response to the capitalist basis of our suffering and the resultant emergence of a very strong and self-conscious trade union movement, Mosala criticised Black theology of failing to reach the toiling industrial masses of black people. He said that "It cannot be contested that although Black theology has developed and is well and live, it has not yet, as a weapon of theory, become the property of the struggling black masses. To this extent," he went on, "it is a theory that has not yet become a material force because it has not gripped the masses. It has served its purpose well as a weapon of criticism against white theology and the white society. That activity, however, does not replace criticism of the weapon itself."<sup>18</sup> In criticising Black Theology's polemical and projective limitations, Mosala reduced the problem to enslavement to the weapons of the enemies of black humanity as well as articulating a liberated society in liberal terms. He said: 'Black theologians must

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17 See Dwight Hopkins' *Black theology - U.S.A and South Africa*. (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1989).

18 See Mosala I. and Thlagale's *The Unquestionable Right to be Free*. Johannesburg, Skotaville, p.176.

make clear the nature of the society they struggle for. It is inadequate,' he continued, 'to get by their projective responsibility by uncritically adopting the abstract values of western liberal democracy, like justice, peace, reconciliation and so on.' When he addressed conceptual limitations of Black Theology, he went on and said'... if Black theologians are not to fall prey to the oppressive aspects of the dominant capitalist cultural discourses, they need autonomous critical apparatuses. ... because they have been captive to the hermeneutical and exegetical assumptions of White theology.'<sup>19</sup> These are very strong words, in whatever way one looks at them. In his own response to this critique Itumeleng Mosala opted for a sociological reading of scripture and used it to unmask the oppressive segments of the scriptural texts some of which had long been rejected by the oppressed who have been using intuition and an African perception of God and humanity in textual selection and reading. I personally agree with him and support him in this project because it brings in many ways the text closer to Black working class and peasantry.

The most difficult challenge is that of giving liberating content to theological concepts like justice, love and reconciliation in a way that would present a clear and comprehensive picture of the society that will image the kingdom of God in Azania. What makes it more difficult is the differing class interests of the black theologians that are beginning to surface and colour their view of a just and humane society. Some among them have accepted the liberal democratic ideal while others reject it in favour of a socialist one that will be informed by African humanitarianism as the nearest approximation to the kingdom of God in our circumstances. Among the many differences that are there, there is agreement on one thing namely, that the land has to be returned to the disinherited African people as the first step of reconciliation with themselves and with white fellow christians in Azania.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR S.A. BLACK THEOLOGY**

The most pertinent question that we have to deal with concerns future directions for South African Black theology. Will S.A. Black Theology develop further towards Africa or in the direction that has been proposed by Itumeleng Mosala? These are not very easy questions to answer. Whatever answer we propose has to take the following reality into account. As we have said above, S.A. Black Theology is a critical reflection on a historical project to which the black christian community has committed itself. It is theology

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19 *Ibid* p.141.

the struggle against forces and institutions that dehumanize people and deprive them of the means to live with dignity and solidarity. Black theology also needs to provide norms and values that are necessary in the construction of a society that will be able to sustain and promote human equality and solidarity. This goal which has to be realized in a predominantly capitalist atmosphere that is inherently hostile to the above African values and norms, will always be measured in terms of what we shall perceive to be the imperatives of the kingdom of God. It will continue to occupy the centre stage as the major object of critical theological reflection in the near as well as the distant future. As far as this aspect is concerned, Mosala will continue to be a relevant voice in all efforts to avoid the co-optive power of liberal theological discourses, which will continue to plague black people's attempts at being black and christian in a western christian atmosphere.

Our point of entry into the above historical project that is not unique to our situation, but is instead linked to other similar ones in the world, has to be our identity that will determine what kind of acting subjects we will be. It will have to be based on the growing realization among large segments of the black population that, in spite of all attempts on the part of white people to alienate us from ourselves and from Africa and focus our eyes on Europe as the source of our being and our destiny, as well as all attempts to deform our African consciousness in order for us to be a perpetually deformed people, we are an African people. We are the natural beneficiaries and custodians of the first and oldest civilization ever known to humankind.<sup>20</sup> We are part of the Pan African theological community in the world and share a common past and a common destiny with that community. That has been the basis of the Pan-African dialogue that has been going on among African people on the continent and the diaspora for more than 20 years.<sup>21</sup> Looking back at how

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20 Many African historians and anthropologists have done a tremendous job to disprove white Egyptologists obsession with their thesis that the Nile River civilisation was not an African civilisation. The most powerful, convincing and consistent work is that done by Cheik Anta Diop. See his *The African Origins of civilization - Myth or Reality*. (Chicago, Lawrence Hill, 1974), *Pre-colonial Africa* (Chicago, Lawrence Hill) and *Civilization or Barbarism*.(Chicago, Lawrence Hill).

21 Since 1978 when the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) organised the first consultation for Third World theologians in Dar es Salaam, Black theologians in the U.S.A. have been involved in an ongoing dialogue with Africans on the continent. This dialogue has widened to include African people in the entire diaspora (the Americas, Carribeans, Britain, Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. The most recent Pan African conference was held in Johannesburg on the 16th-21st August 1993. Many books have appeared on this dialogue, the most recent of which are the following: Young 111, U.J. 1986: *Black and African Theologies - Siblings or Distant Cousins*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books; Hopkins, D.N. 1989: *Black Theology - U.S.A. and South Africa - Politics, Culture and Liberation*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books.; Felder, C.H. 1989: *Troubling*

we in South Africa went about retrieving and appropriating our African heritage, I think that we were still determined by the historiographical results of our oppressors. This is evident in our exclusively regional reading of African history, which is what our oppressors determined. We were Southern Africans who entered the Pan African dialogue as 'foreigners' coming from that limited and limiting perspective. Consequently, we cut ourselves off from the wealth of the heritage that we share with other Africans outside of our region. Hence we continue to fail, despite all our best efforts, to explain why we do things as we do, sing as we do, speak as we do, walk rhythmically as we do, respond to the drum as we do, and view the world and God's creation our own way that is not found among other races in the world. I think that our search for what it means to be made in the image of God, a question that searches for a self assured and self loving acting subject on the stage of history, will not be complete until we hold hands with our ancestors on the banks of the river Nile and appropriate that civilization as ours as well as reaffirm the best of that African civilization in the quest for a universal theology that liberates humankind and glorifies God of the oppressed. My reading of the present developments in occupied Azania (South Africa) confirm this projection. It seems to me that with every small crack of the chains of oppression, black people become more and more self-confident and affirm their African identity more and more. This consciousness manifests itself in our spirituality as it does in our reading of the bible in search of how to express our solidarity with those who suffer more than others in the black community.<sup>22</sup>

If the above mentioned African consciousness continues to in from the self understanding and life of black South Africans as a christian people in a foreign capitalist society, then their christian faith and theology will undoubtedly exhibit strong African cultural characteristics some of which are the following.

The communalist perception of humanity with a strong sense of solidarity that is inherent to African culture will greatly influence, not only African ec-

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*Politics, Culture and Liberation.* Maryknoll, Orbis Books.; Felder, C.H. 1989: *Troubling Biblical Waters - Race, Class and Family.* Maryknoll, Orbis Books; Felder, C.H. 1991 (ed.): *Stony the Road we Trod - African American Biblical Interpretation.* Minneapolis, Fortress Press. In South Africa one book appeared namely Maimela, S.S.(ed.)1989: *We are One Voice.* Johannesburg, Skotaville, and many articles in the *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa.*

22 It is an open secret that the African Independent Churches are experiencing a phenomenal growth in the 1980 and 1990s. In the historic churches i.e. churches of colonial origin, Africans are becoming more and more daring in their freedom to express their Africanness in their worship. The more the white regime loses political control over black people, the more white custodians and guardians of western orthodoxy lose control over African christians in their churches.

best be understood as a communal God who is communal, not only in God's dealings with creation, but also from the life of God. God who creates, maintains and purifies the human community should be understood as a God who knows community and lives communally from the very beginning and in the depth of God's life. In other words, human community that is so illusive for many societies in the world today, should be rooted and founded deep inside the life of God. That concept of God will be in harmony with the very high African sense of community that stretches into the world of the ancestors who are in community with God. It is such an image of God that will strengthen African christianity and will come as a contribution to the image of God that emerges from other cultures and life experiences.

That communal concept of God will also have an influence in Christology. If Christology has to be rooted in the life of God, as many theologians say, and functions as God's own condescension to give life and save humanity, it will have to exhibit the communalist characteristics from the beginning to the end. Not only the origin of christology should be perceived and presented as a communal reality. The incarnation itself should be seen and presented as such. The life and praxis of Jesus as a theological praxis will have to be perceived as a communal theological praxis of a communal God who is communal also in God's history of salvation among us. Concretely, the praxis of Jesus itself is clearly a communal praxis in which the disciples have a role in the messianic story. The community of disciples provide fellowship to Jesus and to each other. They lived with Jesus, ate with him, shared his sorrow and concern, shared his happiness and frustrations. They were together with him and lived fully with him in the deepest intimacy that friends and comrades can live together. If christology is based on the reading of the praxis of Jesus, and we accept that the life and praxis of the disciples constitute one life and praxis with that of Jesus, then the life and praxis of the disciples should not be excluded from the theological reading of the life and praxis of Jesus. It should be this communal praxis of the Jesus community that produces a communal theological reading. In other words, the communal praxis of the Jesus community should also be the basis and verification history of the involvement of God in the story of salvation.(*vestigia trinitatis*)

It is especially at the point of crucifixion and the death of Jesus that the African worldview has a very great pastoral impact. The African belief in a community that goes beyond the limits of time, a community that includes the ancestors and those who are still to be born, has a powerful impact on perception of Jesus' death as it does on the passing away of all their loved ones. The loved ones who pass away are not perceived as having died. They

are alive in death. They pass away into the community of those who went before them and are now ahead of them, hence the well known passage rites. The practice of giving those who are being buried, messages to pass on to the ancestors as well as different kinds of provisions that they will need on the way, is also based on that perception. This is also what happened with one of the men who was crucified with Jesus. He too gave him a message to take along. If the communal God was present and involved in the suffering and death of Jesus, suffering with Him and with the Jesus' community, when Jesus' died, he was taken up into the community of God that had been present during the time of extreme suffering.

This view does not in any way exclude the individuality of Jesus, the Son, as it does not exclude the individuality of African people. It also does not deny the loss that is suffered and regretted by those who remain behind. Death is not accepted with resignation and expectation that it will inevitably strike again. The 'why God' question that opens up attempts to understand analytically, that dying and its meaning, is always asked as a communal question. The excruciating pain of that loss is also acknowledged, experienced and absorbed by the community that comes very close to the particular family that is suffering the absence of the loved one. Hence the intensification of concrete and spiritual solidarity with those who are in mourning during that time. There is very profound understanding of what it means when a 'tree that performs multiple functions falls'. The community comes 'with bandages to tend the wound and handkerchiefs to dry the tears of those who are crying' when it closes ranks around that family and preach and pray at the home of the departed. Measures are always taken to prevent the recurrence of death because there is a belief among Africans that if nothing is done, death may dwell in the community.

This means that there is a dialectical approach to the issue of suffering and death, a 'NO' and a 'YES', a QUESTION and an ANSWER that are kept in tension in an event in which the communal God is involved, interrogated and listened to. God's will is sought and accepted by the community.

It is this African perception and spirituality that informs christian reflection on the suffering and death of Jesus.

If that is acknowledged, then we will have a communal christology that will sustain African christianity. It is such a christology that will provide the mental and spiritual resources that will be needed by the South African black community in its long struggle that is wrought with suffering and death, for a

society that approximates the kingdom of God that is the content of our hope.

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