

Black Theology: opiate or material force?



TUTU



"BOTH A IS MY BROTHER
WHETHER HE LIKES IT OR NOT"



BOESAK

The struggle for Azania is contextualised by settler-colonialism, as a form of imperialist domination and accompanied by a capitalist mode of production which, contrary to what its apologists have wanted us to believe, has not been blind as to the colour of whom it exploits. At the ideological level the domination of the Black people has taken the form of christianisation and education, among others, as forms of 'civilisation'. We do not need to retrace the history of missionary enterprise in this country in order to appreciate the validity of our conviction, suffice it to sum up the situation in the words of Dr Takatso Mofokeng;

"The introduction of Christian religion at gun point by these European colonizers and settlers determined the history of the Christian church in South Africa"
(1)

This is not surprising nor is it peculiar to our situation. In all situations of class/racial domination religion and other institutions of 'socialisation' serve the ideological function of reproducing or facilitating the reproduction of the current social relations in the minds of the oppressed. The basic doctrines of the church would thus serve as 'theological safes' that render it morally im-

possible for the underprivileged of that society to develop an ideological suspicion to current social relations.

In occupied Azania christianity has thus served the ideological interests of the white settler-colonialists and their imperialist sponsors and it is in this context that Marx's analysis of religion as an opiate of the people becomes relevant.

However, the rise of Black Consciousness - as an expression of proletarian ideology - spearheaded the rise of Black Theology - an ideological response to the contribution of the Christian church to racial domination. The era of BC exposed the effects of imperialist ideology on the minds of the oppressed and carried out a calculated attack on and conscious departure from the settler-colonialist value-system that had served to foster a docile self-image among the oppressed.

For Black Theology this meant the realisation of religious fanaticism among the masses, resulting in an internalisation of their condition on the one hand, and a concerted effort to "interpret religion as a liberatory philosophy" on the other. The latter has become pertinent especially with the realisation that the struggle for Azania

will reach its efficacious end only with the establishment of a Black proletarian dictatorship.

The question facing Black theologians in this context would thus be: how can the Christian faith, which has obviously reached a large section of the proletariat, be used as a positive force contributory to the revolutionary consciousness necessary to guide our liberatory project?

The Position of Black Theology

Dr I. Mosala is one Black theologian who has come close to answering the above question when he raises his concern for ideological captivity of Black Theology to white theology as he concludes:

"It cannot be contested that although Black Theology had developed and is well and alive, it has not yet as a weapon of theory, become the property of the struggling masses. To this extent it is a theory that has not yet become a material force because it has not gripped the masses" (2)

In a different context William R Jones raises the same concern with regards to Black Theology in the US. He explores three theories of social change that have influenced Black theology. These are:

1. The Maoist "eye-for-an-eye" approach. This derives from Mao Tse Tung's thought that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun...It is only by the use of the gun that the working class and the labouring masses can defeat the armed bourgeoisie and landlords". The ruling class will never negotiate its power away.

2. The "any-means-necessary" approach of Malcolm X, deriving from Malcolm's thought that the context and extent of repression will determine the means the oppressed will use in their liberation. "Don't die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. That is what is meant by equality." However, the guiding principle for Malcolm is that the first option open to the masses is the ballot, only if this is not successful should the gun be considered. Malcolm's theory is also called "ballot or bullet".

3. Martin Luther King Jr's "other-cheek" approach, deriving from King's non-violent strategy. King, following Gandhi, taught that to fight the oppressor violently is not helpful to either side and that the sight of the undeserved suffering of the oppressed will challenge the conscience of the oppressors and lead them to change their minds.

William Jones takes issue with the King approach and concludes that it did no more than promoting white arrogance which led to him being sanctified as a hero in the US. Thus we see three positions from which Black Theology could derive theoretical tools: Mao's 'Bullet for a Bullet', Malcolm's 'Ballot or Bullet' and King's 'No Bullet at all'. Jones leaves the question open for Black theologians to choose an appropriate model. (3)

In our context we wish to argue that Black theology as it is now, has not been able to break with the imperialist Christian values. It's tendency to use the same models and principles of articulation as white theology has led to it reproducing the dominant ideological forms. In this way Black theology has become an opiate of the masses. This is notable especially with the writings and sayings of such theologians as Dr Allan Boesak, Bishop Tutu and others. This will become clear as we take the following arguments on Black

theology:

1. It lost sight of its material context:

As is said above, the context of Black theology was a realisation of a need for self-affirmation by Blacks. At the ideological level this meant a conscious and deliberate rejection of the whole value-system of the racist regime on the one hand, and a development and infusion on the minds of the masses of a revolutionary consciousness necessary for them to carry out their historical task of establishing a new order characterised by the dictatorship of the Black proletariat.

The presupposition this has for Black theology of liberation is that its point of departure should not be an abstract universalism that would end summing up both the oppressor and oppressed under

material reality of class/racial conflicts. Dr Boesak is thus sacrificing the struggle of the masses by subjecting it to the judgement of an ideological tool of domination which he calls 'Christian faith'. There is no neutral faith in the world of class/racial domination -Christian faith must either be a gun for the oppressor or a gun for the oppressed.

The logical ethical conclusion Boesak's tendency has had has been to view with suspicion all attempts by the oppressed to utilise their faith as a positive force to advance their struggle, as Bishop Zulu's sentiment shows:

"Some proponents of Black theology give the impression that theology should be the hand-maid of the Black revolution and that this revolution necessarily must be violent" (5)

Once the ethical agenda for Black



the same fate. The Christian faith as it came to us has to be seen as both an ideological product of the imperialist society and as a weapon of domination over the masses. We can therefore not view the Christian faith as an ideologically innocent entity. Allan Boesak, an avowed Black Theologian, says:

"Christian faith transcends all ideologies and all nationalistic ideals. It transcends specific groups and nations with their specific ideals and interests" (4)

What we hear Dr Boesak saying here is that Christian faith as a human reflection on God and nature operates above the

Theology is set by another theology, Black theology will lose sight of its enemy and might end up fighting against the masses. If Black theologians have seen a need for a Black theology then they must begin to see a need to do it on Black terms. The reality of our society is that there is no common ground for both the oppressor and the oppressed and no amount of piety on the part of Black theologians will help bridge that gap at the ethico-ideological level. As long as Black theologians maintain a 'non-ideological' appropriation of the Christian faith, they are operating at a level different from where the masses are.

2. Interclassism.

By this we mean the interpretation of the Christian faith in such a way that both the oppressor and oppressed are seen equally as sinners, and the view that the Bible is a record of a single history - God's revelation in history.

Mosala tackles this problem when he questions the blind conception of the Bible as the "Word of God" in Black theology. Black theologians seem to see one God in the Bible and their view of the Bible is that it is an unfolding whole. Thus the Bible as a site of class/race struggles is absolutised as an instrument of obedience. This is interclassist in that the problems of one class are universalised and made human problems: the needs of one class, always those of the ruling class, are generalised as normal human needs. This is what another Black theologian says;

"The Black man shares in the basic humanity of all men. He has the same basic longings, hopes, ambitions as anybody else....like all men the Black man is a fallen creature" (6)

What material experience of the oppressor forms the basis for the oppressed to see any convergence of longing or needs between them?

"This line of thought", protests Rostagno "placed the exploited and the exploiter, the revolutionary and the imperialist, who were in need of pardon, under the same heading" (7)

Again this interclassism, this absoluteness of scriptures over and above material reality leads to yet another tragedy for Black Theology — INCLUSIONISM (qualitative alliance of the oppressor and oppressed as one in the struggle). Alan Boesak demonstrates this ideological weakness when dealing with the question of liberal whites:

"I speak of...those whites who have clearly committed themselves to the struggle for liberation and who, through their commitment have taken upon themselves the condition of Blackness...In a real sense they bear the marks of Christ. They are part of the Black Church." (8)

Bishop Tutu has maintained his position on the conviction that "Botha is my brother whether he

likes it or not". This sums up our scepticism. These people are known by the world not only as our leaders but also as representatives of Black thought both at the theological and secular levels and this makes it important for us to scrutinize their points of departure and conclusions over and against our struggle.

We say that the theology they develop is an opiate because it seeks allies with the oppressors. It poses a moral dilemma for the revolutionary struggle and the moral questions it raises do not unfold out of the dynamics of the struggle itself but from the fears and concerns of the white community. In promoting an appropriation of faith above the limits of our situation it is putting the masses at the mercy of the oppressors.

3. Ethical Revisionism

themselves that they can salvage theology. The fact that Western theology has been racist, sexist, capitalist, colonialist and imperialist has not been a mistake on the part of its proponents. To claim that white Christians have used theology for their economic interests must not make us feel sorry for theology - it is their theology. Our major project is how do we deal with this theological onslaught, how do we theologise our own interests.

Black theologians have thus unfairly accused white theologians for not taking into consideration the experiences of the Black people when theologising (as if white theologians had any choice). Black theologians seem scared to be seen to start something new. As another Black theologian puts it:

"In its focus on the poor and the oppressed the theology of liberation is not a new theology; it is simply the proclamation of the age-old Gospel but now liberated from the deadly hold of the mighty" (9)

Rather than incontextualising theology by snatching it from white manipulators and making it relevant to a different situation, should we not first see it for what it is — an instrument of imperial control — and then reject it by doing a completely new theology - the one whose historical develop-

ment is shaped by the Azanian praxis. It is to be unpardonably revisionist for Black theologians to assume the ability to seize the ideological weapon of the imperialists and unleash with the same the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed.

In conclusion we wish to make the following assumptions on what we consider to be important points for an agenda of a Black theology of liberation:

1. The masses in occupied Azania are in the midst of a revolutionary upsurge against the system. We recognise that most of them are Christians and that to wish that away would be unhelpful to our struggle. Therefore Black theology is a necessity. However, for this theology to be a supporting theory in our struggle it has to continually reflect on its priorities and methodology in terms of emerging issues in the struggle.

2. The ideological assault on the masses in this country has taken, among others, a theological form. For Black theology to be blind on this basic fact is to wage the struggle within the limits of the ruling class ideology. Black theology should reconsider its position on the following;

a) approach to the Bible
b) ethical assumptions of the Christian faith.
c) ideological undertones of theology

3. New models of scriptural interpretation and appropriation of the Christian faith have to be developed. In this regard we wish to applaud the works of such Black theologians as Itumeleng Jerry Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng and a few others for applying materialist sociological tools in the study of Black theology. This attempt, though relatively very new in occupied Azania, has laid the basis for a true Black theology for the first time. Unless developed with more vigour and urgency, Black theology will not reach the stage of being a material force for the toiling masses of Black people in occupied Azania.

Footnotes:

Black Solidarity for a Socialist Azania: An Introduction

1. See Quraish Patel "Black Consciousness and the Class Struggle" (April 1981) *Frank Talk* Volume 1 Number 1, page 12. Imrann Moosa in "Workers, Students and the Popular Movement" (5 May 1983) *FTCI* says: "... (I)deology is a complex unity which is produced under specific conditions and which is moulded and remoulded in the process of struggle: indeed, ideology is grounded in *material reality* and is itself a material force. A revolutionary ideology has to emanate from the experiences of the oppressed and the exploited in a society and the kind of oppression and exploitation which they undergo. A revolutionary ideology is, by definition, a dynamic ideology: it must encapsulate the continuous process of change and conflict."
 2. Poled Lectures No. 1: Poled Secretariat, Durban Branch of AZAPO: *FTC IV*: June 1986.
 3. *National Forum* June 1983: page 66.
 4. *Our Urgent Tasks* adopted at Brixton, England on 12th April 1980.
 5. The formulation "scientific socialism" was first used at the National Forum Summit in April 1984. See Michael Tissong, *The Struggle for a Socialist Azania*, AZAPO Council, Houtbosdorp, May 1985: *FTC II*.
 6. Bearing in mind that the BPC operated under conditions making it impossible for it to spell this out.
 7. Adopted in 1975.
 8. See the *Position Paper* on page 22 of this issue.
 9. This subject deserves detailed treatment on its own. Aubrey Mokwena, a former SASO leader and UDF executive member, suggests that the UDF is the true inheritor of the SASO tradition: see *Black Consciousness in Perspective* (1983) *FTC VII*. Frank Chikane maintains that BC is merely a means to the end of a non-racial society, and a necessary "stage of development" for Black people: see Jeremy Cronin and Raymond Suttner (eds): *30 Years of the Freedom Charter*: (1986) Ravan at 235 ff and also the views of Mosiuoa Patrick "Terror" Lekota at 196 ff. Mokgethi Motlhabi *Black Resistance to Apartheid* (1984) Skotaville at 276 states that the general tendency in the UDF is to say that BC has "served its purpose".
 10. Duncan Innes: *Anglo American and the Rise of Modern South Africa* (1984) Ravan at 70.
 11. The defining characteristics of the labour process under conditions of superexploitation are:
 - a. Lower wages, substantially longer working hours and a significantly higher intensity of work per hour than prevail for comparable activities in the advanced countries.
 - b. Part of the costs of sustaining and reproducing this capitalist wage labour is borne by pre- or non-capitalist relations of production.
 - c. The workforce is subjected to extra-economic coercion which enhances the appropriation of surplus value.
 12. David Kaplan: "The Current 'Upswing' in the South African Economy and the International Capitalist Crisis: A Re-Interpretation of South African Development": 16 *WIP Supplement* (February 1981) at 6.
 13. In the Southern African Development Co-Ordination Conference. South Africa produces 77% of the total gross domestic product in Southern Africa, 90% of the energy, three quarters of the coal, iron, wheat, maize and electricity and controls 90% of the military network.
 14. The South African economy has moved into a recovery phase comparable to "the 1977-81 period" where "the scenario was similar": *Takeover Talk* (July 1987) Comment at 14.
 15. Howard Barrell: "Soviet Policy in Southern Africa" 48 *WIP* 3 (July 1987) at 4. See also "Soviet academic wants a 'pink South Africa'" *Natal Mercury* August 31, 1987.
 16. Clem Suntner: *The World and South Africa in the 1990's* (1987) Human & Rousseau at 111. See also Leon Louw and Frances Kendall: *South Africa: the Solution* (1986) Amagi at 200 ff. Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley *South Africa without Apartheid: Dismantling Racial Discrimination* (1986) Maskew Miller submit at 263 that the dismantling of apartheid "will have to be followed by the creation of a true social democracy if South African capitalism does not want to drown in the wake of the inevitable post-apartheid aspirations."
- In our view, a National Convention is a *last resort* for the white ruling class and its imperialist masters.
17. "The National Question" *Frank Talk* Volume 1 Numbers 2 & 3 at 8ff. Paper delivered by Imrann Moosa: Lenasia: 1984: *FTC I*.
 18. Buti Thlagale: "BC in the Labour Force": April 1981: *FTC I*.
 19. See note 17 above.
 20. *Frank Talk* Volume 1 Number 1 at 23.
 21. *Racialism* refers to attitudes, behaviour and "race relations"; "racism" is the systematization of these into an explicit ideology of racial superiority and their institutionalisation in the state apparatus.
 22. W.D. Jordan: *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro 1550-1812*: Penguin Books: Baltimore: 1969 at 20.
 23. See note 19 above.
 24. Walter Rodney: "Marxism in Africa" *FTC II*.
 25. In *Ujamaa — Essays on Socialism* Dar es Salaam 1969 President Nyerere, erstwhile President of Tanzania, wrote:

"African socialism did not start from the existence of conflicting 'classes' in society... The foundation and the objective of African socialism is the extended family. The true African socialist does not look at one class of men as his brethren and another as his natural enemy. He does not form an alliance with the 'brethren' for the extermination of the non-brethren"
 26. 'A Look at the Manifesto' *New Nation*: 1987.
 27. See note 15 above. Cf Alec Erwin "The Question of Unity in the Struggle" (September 1985) *SALB* Volume 11 No. 1 at 51ff and Jeremy Cronin "The Question of Unity: A Reply" (January 1986) *SALB* Volume 11 No. 3 at 31ff.
 28. *News and Letters* 22 May 1987.
 29. S.C. Nolutshungu: *Changing South Africa: Political Considerations*: (1983) David Philip at 116.
 30. *Op cit* 123.
 31. *Op cit* 124.
 32. *Op cit* 82.
 33. The Black petit bourgeoisie can be broken up into:
 - a) Bureaucratic petit bourgeoisie ie. government employees;
 - b) Upper traditional petit bourgeoisie ie. big traders and professionals;
 - c) Lower traditional petit bourgeoisie ie. small traders;
 - d) Upper new petit bourgeoisie ie. managers in big businesses;
 - e) Lower new petit bourgeoisie ie. nurses, teachers, laboratory assistants, trade union organisers, etc.See Tissong *op cit* 3 and Khangale Makhado "Black Consciousness as a Driving Force" (January 1981) *FTC I*.
 34. Pamphlet issued by the Azanian Labour Monitoring Group: (July 1987) *FTC II*.
 35. H. Simson "The Myth of the White Working Class in South Africa": *African Review* Volume 4 Number 2 (Summer 1974).
 36. Quoted in E.N. Katz *A Trade Union Aristocracy* (1976) African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand at 77.
 37. Andrew Kenny "White Revolution" in *Frontline* (June 1987) at 33. See also Tissong *op cit* 5.
 38. A. Sivanandan "Race, Caste and Class in South Africa" *Frank Talk* Volume 1 Number 5 at 27ff.
 39. Steven Friedman: *Building Tomorrow Today*: (1987) Ravan at 8.
 40. Harald Pakendorf: "Yes, we should be applauding this strike, not regretting it!" *Sunday Times* 16th August 1987. In the end, NUM settled for the Chamber of Mine's *pre-strike* offer, and described the three week walkout as a "dress rehearsal for further action": see "Miners go back as massive strike ends" *Daily News* 31 August 1987.
 41. Julie Vedan: "Trade Union Unity" (June 1984) *FTC V*. See also Don Ncube *Black Trade Unions in South Africa* (1985) Skotaville and Merle Lipton *Capitalism and Apartheid* (1986) David Philip.
 42. Ie. Anglo American, Sanlam, Volkskas, Rembrandt, S.A. Mutual and Anglovaal. Mc Gregor's *Who Owns Whom* (Juta) 1987. *Takeover Talk* July 1987 (Activity) records that Rembrandt has paid R32,5m to make its shareholding in Volkskas stand at 25,4%.
 43. See note 3 above.

Black Theology: Opiate or Material Force

1. Dr. Takatso Mofokeng: "The Evolution of the Black Struggle and the Role of Black Theology" in *The Unquestionable Right to be Free*: I. Mosala and B. Thlagale (eds.) (Skotaville) Page 114.
2. Dr. Itumeleng Mosala: "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology" *op cit* page 176.
3. William R. Jones: "Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Mao, Martin or Malcolm?", in *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* Volume LXXXIII Number 1.
4. Dr. Alan Boesak: *Farewell to Innocence*: Orbis Books: 1977.
5. Bishop A. Zulu.
6. Dr. Simon Gqubule: "What is Black Theology" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* No. 8 September 1978 page 22.
7. Sergio Rostagno: "The Bible: Is an Interclass Reading Legitimate?" in *The Bible and Liberation* Norman K. Gottwald page 63.
8. Dr. A. Boesak: *Black and Reformed*: (Skotaville): 1984 page 24.
9. Dr. A. Boesak: *Farewell to Innocence*: (Orbis): 1977 page 10.