

# The church as seen by a young layman

Steve Biko

just how important it is for the various religions that exist in this world to be uniform. One thing is certain though, that all religions have got similar characteristics:

1. They form man's moral conscience; in other words, embodied within each religion is a set of moral stipulations that govern the spiritual well-being of a particular people within a given context.
2. They all attempt to explain the origin and destiny of man. All are agreed that man in the human form is a transient being in the world; all agree about man's origin as being from some force, the precise nature of which is defined differently. Where religions tend to differ is in the enunciation of the destiny of men.
3. All religions claim or almost claim a monopoly on truth about the nature of the supreme being and about the way to identify with his original intention about men.

Each religion is highly ritualistic. Through years of practice, the religion develops a certain pattern and procedure that in later years becomes inseparable from the central message of that religion.

If one takes religion as nothing else but what it is-i.e. a social institution attempting to explain what cannot be scientifically known about the origin and destiny of man, then from the beginning we can see the necessity of religion. All societies and indeed all individuals, ancient or modern, young or old, identify themselves with a particular religion and when none is existent, they develop one. In most cases religion is intricately intertwined with the rest of cultural traits of society. In a sense this makes the religion part and parcel of the behavioural pattern of that society and makes the people bound by the limits of that religion through a strong identification with it. Where people are subjected to a religion that is removed from their cultural make-up, then elements of disgruntlement begin

to be noted and sometimes open defiance is soon displayed. Hence one can make the claim that most religions are specific and where they fail to observe the requirements of specificity then they must be sufficiently adaptable to convey relevant messages to different people in different situations. For indeed, each religion has a message for the people amongst whom it is operative.

These are perhaps some of the things that never were uppermost in the minds of the people who brought Christianity into South Africa. Whereas Christianity had gone through rigorous cultural adaptation from ancient Judea through Rome, through London, through Brussels and Lisbon, somehow when it landed in the Cape, it was made to look fairly rigid. Christianity was made the central point of a culture which brought with it new styles of clothing, new customs, new forms of etiquette, new medical approaches, and perhaps new armaments. The people amongst whom Christianity was spread had to cast away their indigenous clothing, their customs, their beliefs which were all described as being pagan and barbaric.

Usage of the spear became a hallmark of savagery. All too soon the people were divided into two camps-the converted (*amagqobhoka*) and the pagans (*amaqaba*). The difference in clothing between these two groups made what otherwise could have been merely a religious difference actually become at times internecine warfare. Stripped of the core of their being and estranged from each other because of their differences the African people became a playground for colonialists. It has always been the pattern throughout history that whosoever brings the new order knows it best and is therefore the perpetual teacher of those to whom the new order is being brought. If the white missionaries were "right" about their God in



I am aware that today I am addressing myself to a group of people with whom I differ in two respects:

Firstly, I am a layman talking to a group of religious ministers. Secondly, I am a young man talking to fairly elderly people.

These are perhaps the two aspects that brought me here. An attempt to close the generation gap is always fundamental in the re-examination of any hitherto orthodox situation which seems to be fast becoming obsolete in the minds of young people. Also important, is the need to make common the concept of religion, especially Christianity, understanding of which is fast becoming the monopoly of so-called theologians. For this reason I am going to deal with the topic in a lay fashion.

To my mind religion can be defined as an attempt by man to relate to a supreme being or force to which he ascribes all creation. Our particular model at this moment is Christianity. It is not quite clear

the eyes of the people, then the African people could only accept whatever these new know-all tutors had to say about life. The acceptance of the colonialist-tainted version of Christianity marked the turning point in the resistance of African people.

The Church and its operation in modern-day South Africa has therefore to be looked at in terms of the way it was introduced in this country. Even at this late stage, one notes the appalling irrelevance of the interpretation given to the Scriptures. In a country teeming with injustice and fanatically committed to the practice of oppression, intolerance and blatant cruelty because of racial bigotry; in a country where all black people are made to feel the unwanted step-children of a God whose presence they cannot feel; in a country where father and son, mother and daughter alike develop daily into neurotics through sheer inability to relate the present to the future because of a completely engulfing sense of destitution, the Church further adds to their insecurity by its inward-directed definition of the concept of sin and its encouragement of the "mea culpa" attitude.

Stern-faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their thieving, house-breaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery etc. No-one ever attempts to relate all these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of schooling and migratory labour. No one wants to completely condone abhorrent behaviour, but it frequently is necessary for us to analyse situations a little bit deeper than the surface suggests.

Because the white missionary described black people as thieves, lazy, sex-hungry etc., and because he equated all that was valuable with whiteness, our Churches through our ministers see all these vices I have mentioned above not as manifestations of the cruelty and injustice which we are subjected to by the white man but inevitable proof that after all the white man was right when he described us as savages. Thus if Christianity in its *introduction* was corrupted by the inclusion of aspects which made it the ideal religion for the *colonisation* of

people, nowadays in its *interpretation* it is the ideal religion for the maintenance of the *subjugation* of the same people.

It must also be noted that the Church in South Africa as everywhere else has been spoilt by bureaucracy. No more is it just only an expression of the sum total of people's religious feelings, it has become in fact highly institutionalised not as one unit but as several powerful units, differing perhaps not so much on scriptural interpretations as in institutional aims. It has become inconceivable to think of South Africa without a Roman Catholic church or a Methodist Church or an Anglican Church etc. in spite of the fact that the average Methodist from the street hardly knows how he differs from an Anglican or Congregationalist. This bureaucracy and institutionalisation tends to make the Church removed from important priorities and to concentrate on secondary and tertiary functions like structures and finance etc. And because of this, the Church has become very irrelevant and in fact an "ivory tower" as some people refer to it.

Going hand in hand with the bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of the Church is a special brand of a problem which also makes the Church extremely irrelevant - the concentration of that bureaucracy and institutionalisation in the hands of white people. It is a known fact that, barring the Afrikaans Churches, most of the Churches have 70, 80 or 90% of their membership within the black world. It is also a known fact that most of the Churches have 70, 80 90% of controlling power in white hands. It is still a known fact that white people simply don't know black people, and in most cases do not have the interests of black people at heart.

Therefore it can be reasonably concluded that either the black people's Churches are governed by a small non-sympathetic foreign minority or that too many black people are patronising foreign Churches. Which of these two it is, is not quite clear, but let us assume that it is the former, since the majority of the people in this country are black people.

In that case therefore, black people who are Christians are not only conniving at the hitherto irrelevant nature of Christianity as spelt out by the Churches, but they also allow a non-sympathetic minority which is not interested in making Christianity relevant to people remain in control of the workings of the Churches. This is an untenable situation which if allowed to continue much longer will deplete from the already thinning crowds that go to Church on Sunday.

Then too, the tendency by Christians to make interpretation of religion a specialist job, results in general apathy in a world which is fast departing from identification with mysticism. Young people nowadays would like to feel that they can interpret Christianity and extract from it messages relevant to them and their situation without being stopped by orthodox limitations. This is why the Catholic Church with its dozens of dogmas either has to adjust fast to a changing world or risk the chance of losing the young constituency. In various aspects, this applies to all Churches in the Christian world.

Before looking at suggested changes within the Church, let me then summarise what I regard as my major criticisms of it:

1. It makes Christianity too much of a "turn the other cheek" religion whilst addressing itself to a destitute people.
2. It is stunted with bureaucracy and institutionalisation.
3. It manifests in its structures a tacit acceptance of the system i.e. "white equals value".
4. It is limited by too much specialisation.

The most important area to which we should perhaps direct ourselves is gaining the control that is rightfully ours within these Churches. In order to do this, we must agree that in fact we have a common purpose, a common goal, a common problem. Equally we should agree that through living in a privileged society, and through being socialised in a corrupt system, our white Christian counterparts though brothers in Christ have not proved themselves brothers in South Africa. We must agree also that

tacitly or overtly, deliberately or unawares, white Christians within the Churches are preventing the Church from assuming its natural character in the South African context, and therefore preventing it from being relevant to the black man's situation.

It has been said by many a black church man, that whites are in power within the Churches, because the Churches are modelled on Western lines which white people know best. In order to be able therefore to change the Churches, we have first to gain ascendance over them in that white model, then thereafter turn that model into one we cherish, we love, we understand, and one that is relevant to us. I can only point out here that it cannot be conceivable that all the white people in controlling positions within the Church are elected by other white people. Obviously some get into their positions because they caucus vote-wielding blacks to put them in those positions. It is high time that black people learn the highly tried method of *caucusing* to put other black people in control of Churches in which black people have something at stake. Such elected blacks will obviously have to function accor-

ding to a mandate clearly outlined by the same black caucus that put them in power.

The second area in which we must focus our attention is a thorough understanding of what many people have hitherto scorned, namely Black Theology. There is a truth in the statement that many people can say one thing differently because they look at it from different angles. Christianity can never hope to remain abstract and removed from the people's environmental problems. In order to be applicable to people, it must have meaning for them in their given situation. If they are an oppressed people, it must have something to say about their oppression.

Black Theology therefore is a situational interpretation of Christianity. It seeks to relate the present-day black man to God within the given context of the black man's suffering and his attempts to get out of it. It shifts the emphasis of man's moral obligations from avoiding wronging false authorities by not losing his Reference Book, not stealing food when hungry and not cheating police when he is caught, to being committed to eradicating all cause

for suffering as represented in the death of children from starvation, outbreaks of epidemics in poor areas, or the existence of thugery and vandalism in townships. In other words it shifts the emphasis from petty sins to major sins in a society, thereby ceasing to teach the people to "suffer peacefully".

These are topics that black ministers of religion must begin to talk about seriously if they are to save Christianity from falling foul with black people particularly young black people. The time has come for our own theologians to take up the cudgels of the fight by restoring a meaning and direction in the black man's understanding of God. No nation can win a battle without faith, and if our faith in our God is spoilt by our having to see Him through the eyes of the same people we are fighting against then there obviously begins to be something wrong in that relationship.

Finally, I would like to remind the black ministry, and indeed all black people that God is not in the habit of coming down from heaven to solve people's problems on earth.

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# Black consciousness and the quest for a true humanity

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It is perhaps fitting to start by examining why it is necessary for us to think collectively about a problem we never created. In doing so, I do not wish to concern myself unnecessarily with the white people of South Africa, but to get to the right answers, we must ask the right questions; we have to find out what went wrong -where and when; and we have to find out whether our position is a deliberate creation of God or an artificial fabrication of the truth by power-hungry people whose motive is authority, security, wealth and comfort. In other words, the "Black Consciousness" approach would be irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society. It is relevant here because we



believe that an anomalous situation is a deliberate creation of man.

There is no doubt that the colour question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons. The leaders of the white community had to create some kind of barrier between blacks and whites so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification for the obvious exploitation that pricked even the hardest of white consciences. However, tradition has it that whenever a group of people has tasted the lovely fruits of wealth, security and prestige it begins to find it more comfortable to believe in the