

BLACK THEOLOGY REVISITED:

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Scientists of religion in general and sociologists of religion in particular are in agreement that all religions reflect social-cultural concerns of people at different levels of historical development. To use common sociological language, religion is as much a dependant as an independant social variable.

Relativity

Apart from anything else this way of looking at religion is important for re-introducing a historical perspective in the study and understanding of religion. *It is thus no longer scientifically admissible to speak of any religious tradition as the supreme means through which the supreme uncontested God revealed itself.* We are, therefore, at last able to speak of the only non-ideological relativity in respect of both God and religion, namely historical relativity.

Armed with this thorough-going historical perspective on the nature of and origins of all religions, one is able to de-ideologise and expose the true character of the clash between colonial and indigenous religion in South Africa for in this clash is embodied not only the conflict between two religious outlooks, but, more fundamentally, the collision between two historically different social systems: pre-capitalist African social formations and Western Capitalist social formations. Any attempt, therefore, to understand the dissonance between African religions and Christianity must start with an analysis of these two social systems.

From Communal to Tributary Formations

By the time of conquest from the 17th century onwards, African so-

cieties had developed from communal to tributary social formations. As communal formations they had been characterised by the communal ownership of the fundamental means of production: land and cattle. Ideologically these organisations were reinforced by a highly pervasive ancestor cult reflecting the relatively low level of the forces of production. In other words the African forefathers and foremothers were the key to unravelling the mysteries and resolving the conflicts of the natural world which sometimes acted in a hostile manner to African producers of the communal society. Science was ideological and to a large extent religious. The purpose was, however, the same as in all societies, namely the harnessing of natural forces in order to meet all-round human needs.

The relative success of communal producers in taming nature, coupled with differences in physical capabilities and geographical placements, as well as historical struggles between groups resulted in the production and control of surplus products which in turn made possible the development of internal differentiations within this society. It is difficult to say with precision when this transition occurred. Nevertheless, the outcome was tributary social systems with chiefs and the royal nobility as the ruling classes of the new society. The fundamental characteristic of this stage of development was the extraction of tribute in the form of brisket of slaughtered and hunted animals, labour rent on the royal fields, as well as the sole control of the allocation of land by the chief and of stray cattle (*matimela*) and therefore of his advantaged ability to practise the system of *mafisa* (loan cattle).

It is important, however, to remember that the communal system existed



for a long time in articulation with the tributary system. That is to say, notwithstanding the economic and social divisions created by the tributary organisation, the values and norms of the communal system prevailed alongside the new arrangements. It would be deceptive, though, to imagine that they persisted unchanged by the new conditions, even if it was only in form and function. Hence in this society, the father of the household surrendered his priestly and herbalist roles to the chief or royal appointees. The household ancestors also became subordinate to the royal ancestors.

The above brief details are being spelled out in order first, to avoid romanticism about the nature of the society that colonial capitalism conquered, and second, in order to explain the social-historical reasons for the conflict between indigenous people and colonial foreigners. One more point needs to be made about tributary African societies, therefore, before the conflict with colonial society can be addressed: while the chief's position of power derived from his appropriation of tribute, the system, by virtue of its articulation with the communal one, was counterbalanced by a complicated network of redistribution of the surplus. In times of famine and poor harvest, for in-

stance, the chief's granary would be the source of food for those affected, and his cattle would be used to implement the *mafisa* system. Hence the saying: *Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho* (A Chief is a chief only because of the people).

The point being made, therefore, is that on the one hand the danger to romanticise by viewing African pre-capitalist societies as internally undifferentiated should be avoided, and on the other hand the fact should not be lost sight of that notwithstanding these divisions African producers prior to colonialism had access to the fundamental means of production: land and cattle.

African religion, therefore, was shaped by the material conditions and relations of this society, and functioned as a cultural-ideological tool in the process of producing and reproducing African societies. In this regard it is not in principle different from any other religion in the world. The difference is in the fact that it is connected with the African social-historical reality.

Christianity

It is not necessary to go into the same kind of detail with regard to Western Christianity. Suffice it to point out that the latter is historically traceable in its Catholic version to its co-optation by the state during the reign of Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, and in its Protestant variation to the rise of bourgeois capitalist society in the 16th century. *In both versions it has functioned as a cultural-ideological tool for the production and reproduction of European feudal and capitalist social relations.*

Thus the attempt to implant Christianity among the indigenous Black people from the 17th century onwards, was more than an attempt to win religious converts; it was an effort to transform, by dismantling, African societies. Both the missionaries and the indigenous people knew this. It was for this reason that the conflict took the form of a military-political struggle. That struggle has been a protracted one. It never ceased.

Black theology is an attempt to theorise that struggle from a position of commitment to the Black side of the conflict that has its roots in the 17th century.

Western Theology

White Western theology as practised both in the West and in the colonies has more than validated the assertion that in every epoch the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling classes. Protestant theology in particular has served, consciously or unconsciously, as the ideological justification of capitalist relations of production and distribution. This point has been made and demonstrated before and does not need to be laboured here. Suffice it to indicate that its emphasis on the fundamental corruptibility of humans and its location of heaven outside history have worked well to mystify exploitative social relations of production and to postpone the demand for justice to an unknown future. Even when an attempt was made to make the gospel relevant to the needs of people in the present, capitalist society could not be transcended, either in thought or in practice. This becomes crystal clear when one looks at the limitations of the "secularisation" theologians of the 1960's, who identified theological relevance with resignation to capitalist technology and industrialisation. From these attempts emerged Theologies of Development which were commensurate with neo-colonial developmentalist policies championed by imperialist countries in the 1960's.

Liberation Theology

As a response, first, to the inherent failure of the Development programmes, and second, to the accompanying hollowness of the theologies of development, Latin Americans opted for a theology of liberation.

Their argument was simple if poignantly clear: the underdevelopment of the underdeveloped countries is causally related to the development of developed countries. The logical outcome of this analysis was that libera-

tion and not development was the solution to the problems of the exploited masses of Latin America. This analysis of the Latin American reality led to the exposure of the inherent inapplicability of white Western theology in any of its forms, whether conservative or progressive. What was needed was a theology that emerges from the experience of the struggle of the poor peasants and working class masses of Latin America.

The theology of liberation, therefore, had to make a complete break with white theology. Nothing short of this would qualify their theology as a tool of the struggle in the liberation process which was already underway.

BT and BC

In South Africa, where a qualitatively different set of material and social conditions existed, Black theologians in response to these determinate historical conditions, evolved a Black Theology of liberation. This theology, like the Latin American theology of liberation, is based on an analysis of the reality of Black experiences and struggles in South Africa. It is not the outcome of philosophical speculation by a privileged minority. It is rather the result of objective historical circumstances.

Black Theology as a theological expression and theorisation of the Black struggle for liberation cannot be understood outside the context of the Black Consciousness philosophy. This latter phenomenon is itself the product of an accurate analysis of the Black experience within the wider social-material reality of South Africa.

Black theology seeks to reflect theologically on the nature of Black oppression and exploitation in order to arm the new Black subjects that Black Consciousness creates with an awareness of the theological validity of the struggle for liberation. There is again no need to belabour the point here. Black Theology apologises to no one for its existence. It owes its allegiance to the oppressed and exploited people only, no one else.

Reality

It is important, however, to respond even if only briefly, to some of the challenges that the ideological climate in the country today has created.

Recently it has been implied, and in some quarters asserted that the use of class tools to analyse society necessitate the irrelevance of Black Theology. Apart from the racist arrogance of this claim, Black Theology's response is that the onus is with those who assert this to demonstrate its irrelevance. More importantly, though, Black Theology argues that being a committed theorisation of reality from the Black experience, its lifespan is inextricably bound up with this reality.

Black theology insists also that racism as a socio-political structure must be distinguished from racialism which refers only to attitudes of people about other people. It thus refuses to separate oppression from exploitation, arguing that the former

is indispensable for the successful execution of the latter. It is idealist to imagine that exploitation can be sustained without oppression. Thus in the South African context, racism as an oppressive structure is the soul of capitalist exploitation. To assert the contrary is to be ahistorical.

The historical self-manifestation of capitalism in this country has been from the beginning racist. For this reason, Black Theology's anti-racist struggle is inseparable from its anti-capitalist struggle which is unthinkable without its anti-racist struggle.

Abstract class struggles against abstract capitalism is not part of Black Theology's brief. For Black Theology class is race and race is class in this context. This reality remains despite mystifications from the racist left about the creation of a Black middle class.

Dependencies of all kinds are rejected by Black Theology, whether they be political, social, economic, or even theoretical-intellectual ones. It is clear

that dependencies constitute the basis of oppression and exploitation. "It is therefore important to point out that class analysis as a theoretical tool does not create the experience of class oppression and exploitation."

Thus Black oppressed and exploited classes know their experience and they know that it is articulated through a racist political structure.

There is, therefore no turning back from the anti-racist, anti-capitalist struggle of Black Theology, despite challenges from the right and the "left."

One may end appropriately by stating in characteristic Biblical fashion that "Not everyone who says liberation, liberation, wants to bring about a just society". Black people will have to rely on themselves *only* to bring this about. The struggle that Black Theology is waging is an anti-racist, anti-capitalist struggle. Black Theology will not be co-opted or made to be defunct as long as the material reality that gave birth to it persists. ■

