

BLACK THEOLOGY*

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According to the concepts of Black Theology, blacks should be proud of their blackness because "their God is black". Seeing, then, that He is black, He is on their side as the oppressed people. Thus it is a theology by the black man of the black God.

WHAT IS BLACK THEOLOGY?

Sometimes it is also called Black Power, Black Consciousness, African Theology, the Theology of Liberation, etc. It is better for me to let those who are involved in Black Theology speak out. I therefore quote the following definitions from the 1971 Congress of the UCM:

"Black Consciousness implies the totality of involvement of black people and hence the message of Black Consciousness has to be spread to reach all segments of the oppressed community. Black Theology, the ideology of the oppressed people and liberation is an important aspect of black consciousness and seeks to relate Black people to their God, a fighting God who abhors all repressive regimes".

Basil Moore says of Black Theology that it is "a theology of the oppressed for the liberation of the oppressed" (Moore, 1973, p. IX).

Cone (1970, p. 25-26) identifies Black Theology with the Exodus of Israel from Egypt when he says that "... in a racist society, God is never color blind. To say God is color blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, to good and evil. Certainly this is not the picture of God revealed in the Old and New Testaments. Yahweh takes sides. On the one hand, he sides with Israel against the Canaanites as she makes her settlement in Palestine. On the other hand, he sides with the poor within the community of Israel against the rich and other political oppressors.

In the New Testament Jesus is not *for all*, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors".

Cone says the following about the *point of departure* of Black Theology: "The insistence on a passionate theology is a call for an anthropocentric point of departure in theology. We are concerned with concrete man, particularly with oppressed man. This is the point of departure of Black Theology because it believes that oppressed man is the point of departure of Christ Himself".

Manas Buthelezi underlines this anthropocentric point of departure in his article *An African Theology or a Black Theology*. He says that "In the light of the approach

the starting point for theological reflection is the existential situation in which the Gospel finds man" (Moore, 1973, p. 7).

Cone also points out the connection between Black Theology and Black Power. "How are Black History and Black Power related to Black Theology?". Black History is recovering a past deliberately destroyed by slavemasters, an attempt to revive old survival symbols and create new ones.

Black Power is an attempt to shape our present economic, social and political existence according to those actions that destroy the oppressors' hold on black flesh. Black Theology places our *past* and *present* actions towards black liberation in a theological context seeking to destroy alien gods and create value structures according to the God of Black Freedom.

The significance of Black Theology then is found in the conviction that the content of Christian Gospel is liberation. Christian theology, then, ... is that discipline that analyses the meaning of God's liberation in the light of Jesus Christ, showing that all actions that participate in the freedom of man are indeed the actions of God" (Moore, 1973, p. 52-53).

I complete these definitions by quoting Steve Biko, who maintains that "Black Theology ... seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the Black man and his daily problems. It wants to describe Christ as a fighting god, not a passive god who allows a lie to rest unchallenged. It grapples with existential problems and does not claim to be a theology of absolutes. It seeks to bring back God to the Black man and to the truth and reality of his situation. This is an important aspect of Black Consciousness, for quite a large proportion of black people in South Africa are Christians still swimming in a mire of confusion — the aftermath of the missionary approach. It is the duty, therefore, of all black priests and ministers of religion to save Christianity by adopting Black Theology's approach and thereby once more uniting the black man with his God" (Moore, 1973, p. 43).

Thus it is clear that Black Theology may be equated with Black Power and Black Consciousness. It is also, in the words of Steve Biko, "not a theology of absolutes".

It is a theology of the black man, directed to all those who are the true black people. Who are these true black people? They might be described thus:

"... Those fearless of the unconventional
Moved towards their own blackness,
Prone to influence and set trends
Schooled in their times and folkways,
Dedicated to worthwhile endeavours,
Attentive to meaningful expression".

Thus the true black people are those who are moved *towards* their own blackness.

To the South African blacks, Black Theology presents itself as an instrument to be

used to liberate themselves from the oppression inflicted upon them by the white man.

All channels or platforms which might be used to speak out and give voice to their opposition to racism and oppression having been closed to the black man in South Africa by government, "the only platform open to black people is the Christian pulpit" (Moore, 1973, p. IX).

THE VIEW OF GOD IN BLACK THEOLOGY

Once more we have to let these people speak for themselves.

Mokgethi Motlhabi tells us how we are to understand or know Black Theology, for "Much of our language concerning God shows Him to be the authoritarian par excellence. We speak of Him in terms most which are variations of a supreme ruler: Master, Lord, King, Judge, Father, Supreme Being, Omnipotent, etc. At the same time man is pictured as one who should be in total submission, and thus our language sees him in variations of slave, servant, son, child, etc.

There can be no denying that the mainstream of Western Christianity regards God as the One who has the inalienable right to rule over His creation. Thus the religious man par excellence is characterized by the prized attribute of total obedience. The irreligious man is the one who manifests the cross evil of disobedience.

The implication of all this is that there is only one will in the cosmos that really matters, namely the Divine will. Every other will is to be brought into submission to this will. But this means that there ought to be no people who are authentically themselves" (Moore, 1973, p. 124).

Motlhabi therefore concludes that "... in the light of this, Black Theology has a dual role, if it is to speak of a new word of freedom to our power-mad situation. On the one hand it must reject all language about God which seems to make him out to be the authoritarian par excellence. This means a rejection of various 'Master' images of God as well as the concepts of his controlling the lives of people and carrying the power to reward the obedient with heaven and to punish the disobedient with hell. None of these images and concepts allows us to be free and authentically ourselves in our relationship with God, and all carry within them the seeds of authoritarianism which will grow in those who claim access to the Divine Will and thus a rightful share in God's authority to reward and punish. In the place of these authoritarian images which speak of the suffering God who is identified with the oppressed in their suffering and who struggles in and with them to lift the burden of oppression. As such God is neither our servant, to be treated as we choose, but our comrade and friend in the struggle for freedom. Alongside this, however, Black Theology must point the way to the possibility of our living in freedom without authoritarian power structures in our society" (Moore, 1973, pp. 126-127).

Cone has the following comment to make: 'Because black people have come to know themselves as black, and because that blackness is the cause of their own love of themselves and hatred of whiteness, God himself must be known only as He reveals himself in his blackness... The Black Theologian must reject any Conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples.

Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes his or he is a God of racism ... The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition his own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as his people and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, God disclosed to men that He is known where men experience humiliation and suffering ... The Blackness of God then means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation. Taking seriously the Trinitarian view of the Godhead, Black Theology says that as Father, God identified with oppressed Israel participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Son became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, he continues his work of liberation. ... In America, the Holy Spirit is black people making decisions about their togetherness, which means making preparation for an encounter with white people" (1970, pp. 120-122).

One cannot in all conscience just disregard what the adherents of Black Theology are saying. It is true that things are not in order — in the political, social, economic and other spheres of life. Each government, whether black or white, should learn to live according to the tenets of the Word of God. If we fail to do this, we might invoke the wrath of God upon our heads. As South Africans all of you should know the situation well enough.

SUMMARY

The main teachings of Black Theology may be stated in the following brief terms:

1. Its message is directed to the *oppressed community* – that is, the blacks.
2. Its important aspect is *liberation*.
3. Jesus (God) is not for all but only for the *oppressed* (the blacks), the *poor* (the blacks) and the *unwanted* of society (the blacks). Jesus is against the *oppressors* (the whites). If whites should want to be liberated, to be saved, Cone suggests that they ask themselves the following question, viz. "How can we become black?".
4. Black Theology is not a theology of absolutes
5. Black Theology sees South African black pastors (those trained by whites and in institutions run by whites) as people swimming in a mire of confusion — as part of the aftermath of the missionary approach. Some of us have heard it said openly that Calvinism, as practised and taught by the NG (the Dutch Reformed Church), the Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerk in South Africa to the black people is the theology of oppression, and therefore such black people would need re-education.

6. Black Theology rejects all language about God which sets Him as the One above all (His Sovereignty) and who must be obeyed.
7. God is not our Master but our Comrade and friend.
8. God is black, and if not, He is guilty of racism.

CONCLUSION

I am forced to the conclusion that Black Theology has failed greatly to grip the biblical message. By putting blacks on a safe side as those who are innocent, it is denying them the true message of Jesus Christ which brings true liberation from sin, death and the curse of the holy law of God. The Bible clearly teaches that all (oppressors and oppressed) have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. God is not going to let me into his Kingdom because I am black and because the white man is oppressing me.

Sin as the problem of the human race is absent from the minds of Black Theologians. This is perhaps because this theology is a relative theology — it does not contain any absolutes. By rejecting all language about God which sets Him up as the absolute and Sovereign Lord who does as He wants with his creatures, Black Theology is attempting to dethrone God. By saying that God is “not our Master but our Comrade and our friend”, I hear the hissing of the serpent when it said that “... you shall be as God”.

Whether it be Black Theology or White Theology it must be rejected if it aims to absolutize man or if theology is used to make other people sleepy!

It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ which imparts to man his true manhood and dignity. Any theology which wants to take that away, whether it be Black or White Theology, must be rejected. We attain freedom and shake off our bonds when we live according to the Word of God.

It is a well-known saying in Africa that some white missionaries, while advocating White Theology, told the black man to shut his eyes in prayer. When he opened his eyes, however, he found that his cattle and his land had been taken away from him — by the white man. According to Karl Marx, such a theology is the opium of the people. Both Black and White Theology would seem to have failed greatly.

In the light of all these evils, the Church of Jesus Christ should condemn and proclaim the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ. With AWP, I say that “Present-day conditions call loudly for a new examination and new presentation of God's Sovereignty. From every pulpit in the land it needs to be thundered forth that God still lives, that God still observes, that God still reigns.

Faith is now in the crucible, it is being tested by fire, and there is no fixed and sufficient resting-place for the heart and mind but in the *Throne of God*. What is needed now, as never before, is a full, positive, constructive setting forth of the *Godhood of God*’.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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