

# Black Theology in South Africa and North America: Prospects for the Future; Building of Alliances

by Dr Itumeleng J Mosala

Two insights may provide a useful starting point for an attempt to develop a vision of the future of black theology. Both of these are inscribed in Marx's celebrated political text: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The one insight concerns the discursive weapons of struggle that activists in oppositional struggles invoke; and the other involves the qualitative differences that Marx observes between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions. About the first he writes:

"Men (sic) make their history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. . . .

The awakening of the dead in those

revolutions therefore served the purpose of glorifying new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given tasks in imagination, not of taking flight from their solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk again . . . .

Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the second insight Marx asserts;

"Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm more swiftly from success to success; their dramatic effects outdo each other; men and things seem set in sparkling brilliants; ecstasy is the everyday spirit; but they are short lived; soon they have attained their zenith, and a long depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm and stress period. Proletarian revolutions, on the other hand, like those of the nineteenth century, criticize themselves consistently, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to

1. Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, in One Volume, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1968, pp 96-98.

begin it afresh, decide with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again more gigantic before them . . ."<sup>2</sup>

In America and South Africa, black theologians have done both of these two things. They have appealed to their history and culture for tools of self-defense and struggle. By doing this they have affirmed the significance of Gayraud Wilmore's assertion that "the first source of black theology is the black community itself".<sup>3</sup> Similarly, albeit thinly and unsystematically, they have faced the question which J Ngubane poses as *the* challenge of black theology: ". . . is it more comprehensive, concerned not only with oppressive societal issues, but also with cultural and philosophical issues?"

Black theologians have taken their cue from the *past* traditions of struggle in order to stage a revolution in the *present*. The value of this has been to maintain a historical perspective without which present struggles retain a fatal blindspot. The concern remains, however, whether in this appropriation of history and culture the "phrase goes beyond the content or the content beyond the phrase".

But that is precisely the reason for this conference of Azanians and African Americans. We are here to criticise and interrupt ourselves; to return to our apparent successes in order to start again. We are gathered here to allow ourselves an unmerciful self-criticism on our weaknesses and the paltriness of our first attempts. And even more

fundamentally, we are here to remind ourselves that our adversary has fallen down only in order that he/she may draw new strength and rise again more gigantic than before. The recent-re-emergence in South Africa of white liberalism under the guise of "left progressivism" is a case in point.

Thus a consideration of the future prospects of black theology implies an appraisal of its projective, critical and appropriative functions.<sup>5</sup> This is necessary if black theology is not to degenerate into a theological fad. It is better to start again, in the spirit of Marx's second insight, than to pass quickly from one contentless revolution to another. Black theologians must make clear the nature of the society they struggle for. It is inadequate to get by their "projective" responsibility by uncritically adopting the abstract values of western liberal democracy, like justice, peace, reconciliation, etcetera. Also, if black theologians are not to fall prey to the oppressive aspects of the dominant capitalist cultural discourses, they need autonomous "critical" apparatuses. This is especially indispensable in areas such as biblical hermeneutics. The reason is that here, in particular, theologians have been captive to the hermeneutical and exegetical assumptions of white theology.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the question of how black theologians "appropriate" received religious and cultural traditions is of vital importance. The future of black theology is as much dependent on its ability to create new practices as to utilize received discourses.

Assuming the validity of these points I have just made, four areas of

2. *Ibid.*, p 99.

3. G Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1983, p 235.

4. I J Mosala and B Tlhagale (eds), *The Unquestionable Right To Be Free*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1986, p 89.

5. T Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin Or Towards A Revolutionary Criticism*, Verso, London, 1981, p 113.

6. I J Mosala and B Tlhagale, *Op. cit.*, pp 175ff.

concern immediately suggest themselves as requiring urgent critical activity.

### 1. Definitions

In the early days of black theology, the definitional task was taken very seriously. Black theology was defined as reflection on the black experience in the light of the "Word of God". Later this definition was qualified, especially in South Africa, by explaining that blackness here did not refer to the colour of the skin.<sup>7</sup> Since then, there has been a shift in emphasis from definitions to the formulations of content and form within black theology.

Clearly, this shift to the actual "doing" of black theology is to be welcomed. Mokgethi Motlhabi is certainly correct in insisting on the need for "stage two" of black theology.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, an enormous price will be, and is being paid, consequent upon a complete abandonment of the definitional task. In order to appreciate this, let us look again at the implications of the definition of black theology in South Africa.

The initial definition of black theology implied that only black people could do black theology. In fact, in the early days there was no question that this was unequivocally the case. At this point the black theological project was still inseparably tied to the black revolt against the totality of the white world. Neither black nor white people had any doubt about the nature of this revolt. However, as black theology sought accommodation within the discursive terrain controlled by the beneficiaries of the white world, prob-

lems arose. In the domain of academic activity where the ideology of liberalism provides the controlling metaphors, black theology needed to readjust in order to be accommodated. This was particularly serious in South Africa where the white world is *really* white. Liberal theologians had been grieved, while emerging black theologians, the latter being invariably the products of the former, were contradicted, by the demands of the black revolt and its consequences for black theology. Was it not the case that white liberal theologians had helped to create the mood, at least discursively, that led to the rise of black theology? But of course, as Mafeje argues, they did not understand the principle of the negation of the negation.<sup>9</sup> And so black theologians came to their rescue; they qualified blackness to include those white people who are supposedly black in thinking. Since then black theology has had nothing but trouble in South Africa, with white people virtually silencing it in favour of Latin American liberation theology. This debate needs to be aggressively revisited. What for instance is the difference between contextual theology and black theology in South Africa? Is there an ideological-cultural explanation of white "progressive" theologians' predilection for Latin American liberation theology?<sup>10</sup>

But of course there was a fundamental weakness in black theology which made the onslaught on it possible. This weakness has to do with our failure to do "internal", critical definitional work. If in the beginning it was clear that white people could not do

7. A Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1977, p 27.

8. In I J Mosala and B Tlhagale, *op. cit.*, p XII.

9. A Mafeje, "The Problem of Anthropology in Historical Perspective: An Inquiry into the Growth of the Social Sciences", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 10, no. 2, 1976, p 319.

10. The Kairos Document's silence on black people and on the theological discourses of black people, namely, Black Theology and African theology, should be viewed in this light.

black theology, did it follow, though, that all black people could do black theology? Was it correct to be so loose in our definition of the black theological practice as to imply that it amounted to any theology done by any group of black people? The need to tighten up the theoretical and ideological screws in this area cannot be over-emphasised. This applies equally to the U.S.A. and South African situations.

I argue for an ongoing concern for the definitional task of black theology for two reasons. First, because this task is inseparable from the equally important responsibility to "do" black theology. The function of naming reality is an integral part of the process of creating that reality. We name and rename as we execute the production of the black theological discourses. And this terrain is not an ideologically neutral one. The very existence of black theology bears witness to the fact that the definitional function of theological practice is a site of fierce class, gender and cultural struggles.

Second, and tied up with the first reason, the definitional task is crucial to the ongoing practice of black theology because of the present historical conjuncture: the era of monopoly capitalism. This is the period of capitalist development when the "commodity form" extends its influence to all aspects of human life. It is the period of the Universal Market. In this period all discourses, status quo-oriented ones as well as oppositional ones, are vulnerable to co-optations by the "commodity form". Thus in this conjuncture the question of the "images of struggle" always calls to mind its dialectical counterpart, the "strug-

gle for images".<sup>11</sup> In the area of black theology this issue is of pivotal significance. For here, as anywhere, Marx's words ring true that "In every epoch the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class".<sup>12</sup> What needs to be added, though, is that in *no* epoch are the ruling ideas uncontested. The discursive sphere of society is as much an arena of struggle as the non-discursive sphere.

The danger, however, of "neo-young-Hegelianism" must be avoided. The definitional task, and the struggle for images which goes with it, is not a matter of abstract rearrangement of furniture. On the contrary, genuine liberative definitional work requires concrete involvement in actual historical struggles. This task should not be seen as an alternative to "fighting in the streets or in the mountains".<sup>13</sup> Rather, it is an integral part of the same process.

I must underline this point of the unity of theory and practice. For indeed that is what the "definitional task" is in fact about. Presently, this task defines the nature of the crisis of black politics as was illustrated by the Tottenham uprisings in England and the KCT/Cross Roads fiasco in South Africa recently. For as Stuart Hall so poignantly articulated in relation to the Tottenham problem:

"Keeping faith with the people who, in the teeth of relentless oppression, spontaneously resist, is alright on the night. But it is not enough when the next day dawns, since all it means is that, sooner or later, the front line troops, with their superior weapons and sophisticated responses, will corner some of our young people on some dark night along one of these walkways and take their revenge on Tottenham".<sup>14</sup>

11. B Hilton-Barber, "Images of War, War of Images", *Vula!*, (June, 1986), passim.

12. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited by C J Arthur, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970, p 64.

13. A Mafeje, *op. cit.*, p 332.

14. S Hall, "Cold Comfort Farm", *New Socialist*, November 1985, p 12.

The ongoing task of defining black theology, therefore, must not be separated from the continuing production process of the black theological discourses of liberation. Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance*, T Mofokeng's *The Crucified among the Crossbearers*, James Cone's *For My People*, and the Azanian production, *The Unquestionable Right To Be Free*, should all afford us a moment to pause and ask, what after sixteen years do we mean by Black Theology?

## 2. Black Feminist Theology

The area of black feminist theology presents one of the biggest challenges to black theologians. This, not because there is any doubt as to its importance. On the contrary, precisely because, as is commonly held in revolutionary circles, the measure of the success of any liberation struggle is the extent of the liberation of women in that struggle.

Even more importantly, the problem of the "struggle between struggles" makes the question of a black feminist theology exceedingly urgent. The tendency by some struggles to want to subsume other struggles under their aegis is a characteristic feature of "discourse imperialism" under monopoly capitalism. The experience of women and blacks in supposedly socialist organizations is salutary in this regard.

Thus not only is an autonomous black feminist theological discourse a necessity of the objective and subjective conditions of black women's struggle, but it is also a condition of the successful execution of the black liberation struggle. Without such an autonomous discourse of struggle black theology is dangerously truncated.

In this area, a sharing of resources between Azanians and African Americans could help correct the deficit and

drag black theology out of a backwardness which only reinforces white cultural hegemony. A moratorium on other areas of black theological study and production may not be out of place at this time. This is particularly significant given the super-exploitability of black women under conditions of monopoly capitalism.

## 3. Methodological Frameworks and Racism

So far an area of dependency, and in many ways neo-colonialism, for black theology is that of methodological frameworks. Almost invariably, we have been independent on the nature of our theological project but depended on the discursive tools by which we carried it out. This was true of the radical liberal critique of racial imperialism as well as the recent class analysis of capitalist society and culture, both of which underscored our methodological resistance of oppression.

In and of themselves the methodological and theoretical frameworks borrowed from other social and historical *praxes* are not wrong. The dangers do exist, however, of them becoming the means by which new forms of cultural and racial chauvinism and domination may be inaugurated.

In the contemporary South African political discourse, for instance, this is an area in which some black oppositional practices have been debilitated by white theoretical and epistemological paternalism. White people's privileged "ideological-methodological" competence in this area has been, more than anything, the sole legitimator of their inclusion in the progressive circles. In fact the emergence recently of an autonomous, politically legitimating, discourse known as

"progressiveness" is a function of this specifically white privileged domain of methodological competence. Of course, this "competence" is itself the product of the privileged position of white people, especially in areas such as education.

I do not make this point in order to devalue the contribution of this kind of injection into the oppositional practices in South Africa. Indeed the change from liberal democratic and moral rhetoric to quasi-socialist terminology of struggle in South Africa should be credited to this infusion of "progressive" methodological frameworks into the black struggle in recent times.

The question, however, of the racism of the left which is as evil as the racism of the right, needs to be addressed by black theologians. In this regard we can learn an enormous amount of lessons from the feminist movement. This latter movement has an experience of working within the so-called progressive organization.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Black Working Class Culture

The fourth area which black theology needs to address seriously and concerning which lessons from both sides of the Atlantic must be drawn is that of the black working class culture. The black churches in the U.S.A. and especially the African-Independent churches in South Africa provide a wealth of resources in this regard. The black working class culture represents the framework within which black oppressed and exploited peoples either succumb to or revolt against the dominant economic, political, bureaucratic and cultural discourses of their

societies. A systematic and critical exploration and appropriation of the black working class culture is indispensable in the future development of black theology. The following questions could provide a starting point in such a quest:

1. What is the nature of the structure of black existence that makes possible the super-exploitability of the black labour-power?
2. What conditions of social life are necessary in order to ensure the permanent availability of black people as an exploitable form of cheap labour?
3. How are the cultural practices of the black communities made vulnerable to exploitation by the imperialist cultural discourses of monopoly or settler capitalism (e.g. Soweto art being displayed overseas while back home it is militarily and culturally repressed; Cosby show; Mr T., etc.)
4. In what way are black people made participants in their own oppression through manipulations of their consciousness as well as by more overtly repressive mechanisms, and how can this be dealt with; and more importantly, what is the role of the Church, Christianity, the Bible and some of the inherited reactionary black cultural-religious traditions?

#### Conclusion

I would like to end by reiterating what I think is the fundamental problematic facing the black Christian religious wing of the opposition to oppression and exploitation. It is this, that when

15. For a helpful analysis, see Iris Young, "Socialist Feminism and the limits of Dual Systems Theory", *Radical Religion*, vol.V, no. 1, 1980, passim. Specifically relevant to Black theology here is James H Cone's neglected classic: *The Black Church and Marxism*, Institute for Democratic Socialism, New York, 1980.

white people first encountered black people they had the Bible or Christianity and the black people had the land; the white people and the black people prayed; after the prayer, the white people had the land and the black

people the Bible and Christianity. Now the question is that black people have chosen to use the Bible and Christianity to get the land back; but can they get the land back and keep the Bible and Christianity?