

SEARCHING FOR A LIBERATING ETHIC

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt in my mind that we have entered a critical phase in our struggle for liberation. There is a sense in which we stand at cross-roads, where a wrong turn can either lead to authentic liberation or unimaginable catastrophe. In other words there are critical choices to be made and some of those choices have already been made. Whether to continue with struggle or to negotiate. Given the current political situation there are confusing signals.

Those who have held the position to continue with struggle are now inclined to negotiate and those who chose to negotiate are now saying we must now continue with the struggle through mass action. To the average black oppressed person confusion and uncertain is the order of the day. Whilst this confusion prevails and there are conflicting positions held by the key political actors, there is carnage in most of our communities. Is the oppressor simply an observer in this current state of affairs or serious manipulator who is supported by his cohorts who have so much to lose should the edifice of the Apartheid system collapse and crumble? How do we understand our present political context? That is a critical challenge to any liberation ethic.

I do not pretend to have any wisdom to resolve the enormous problems that we confront, but to say I am challenged as a christian to turn to the resources of the christian faith and African wisdom, to gain moral insights that may assist us to choose which way to go. That choice I believe constitutes the challenge of developing a liberation ethic. It is in this context that I share Miguez Boninos perspective when he writes:

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Ethical options are posed by reality (which naturally include previous human decisions and options) to dream of ethical decisions outside this framework of reality is the illusion of moralism. But history will not in any fatal or mechanistic way decide for us the decision always be a human decision.¹

THE KAIROS DOCUMENT AND RUSTERNBERG

I want to suggest that in trying to decide which way to go, we must revisit the challenge of the Kairos document specifically the sections on prophetic theology and challenge to action, for they are an attempt to provide a basis for a liberation ethic in our context. But we also need to move beyond that because of its limitations and address the critical context in which we find ourselves today. In assessing these sections I also wish to make references to the Rusten declaration. Some of the fundamental issues raised in the Kairos document have not been addressed by the church in the South African context. One of these issues has to do with the question of political strategy or rather the kind of political praxis that is required in our present political context. I believe the Kairos document makes a critical point about this

changing the structures of society is fundamentally a matter of politics. It requires a political strategy based upon a clear social and political analysis. The church has to address itself to these strategies and to the analysis upon which they are based. It is into this political situation that the church has to bring the gospel. Not as an alternative solution to our problems as if the gospel provided us with a non-political solution to our problems.²

¹Jose Miguez Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethics, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983 p. 41.

²Kairos Theologians, The Kairos Document Challenge to the Church, Revised Second edition, Johannesburg Skotaville 1986 p.15.

The question we have to ask is to what extent has the church responded to this challenge? As a keen observer of the church, I sense a deep crisis one that is reflected in conflicting and sometimes contradictory statements made by the church on our current situation. The church seems to vascillate between a commitment to taking sides in the struggle for liberation or to assume a mediating role between the key political actors as they struggle for political power. This I believe is the dilemma confronting the church. However this confusion over what is to be done to dismantle the system is also reflected amongst some of political actors in the South African context. At the time when there was euphoria about negotiations, the church responded positively, but when they failed it also responded positively also by supporting mass action. I suppose we can justify this by saying the church reacts and responds to each existential situation. For me this raises fundamental issues about the church's understanding of our political context. This is reflected particularly in the Rustenberg declaration.

We believe, however, that we stand on the threshold of new things. There appears to be the possibility of a new dispensation and the promise of reconciliation between South Africans as some our black leaders and white leaders prepare to negotiate together for a new and liberated nation of equity and justice. In this context christians are called to be a sign of hope from God, to share a vision of a new society which we are prepared to strive for, and if needs be suffer for.³

As I read this part and the subsequent sections, I could not help but marvel at naivete of the statement. One of the problems I have is the perception that there are fundamental changes taking place in our society. I suppose this will depend on what one means by change. This perception of change is shared by both the oppressor and oppressed. Is this just conceptual change or is it something else? James Farr, in his provocative essay on

³L Alberts & F Chikane (eds), The Road to Rustenburg: The church looking forward to a New South Africa, Struik: Cape Town, 1991 p. 276.

understanding conceptual change politically, makes the following observation which I believe is pertinent to our discussion

conceptual change is one imaginative consequence of political actors criticizing and attempting to resolve the contradictions which they discover or generate in the complex web of their beliefs, actions and practices as they try to understand and change the world around them.⁴

One of the fundamental problems that we face in South Africa, as we try to make choices about an alternative social order, is confusion about what key political actors mean by change. This is reflected on a number of different levels both in the church as well as in the secular context. To appreciate this current confusion, one has to examine what is behind De Klerk's reform initiative and why CODESA was bound to fail as instrument to bring about change. In his insightful and timely book The Apartheid state in crisis political transformation in South Africa 1975-1990, Robert Price has made very interesting observations, which I believe are critical for our understanding of the present political impasse. He maintains that the grand design of the reform initiatives which were introduced by PW Botha in 1979, in what was referred to as the twelve principles had three major goals: 1) to preserve white domination by all means whilst promising reform; 2) to end South Africa's pariah status internationally; 3) promote sustained economic growth. This was to be achieved by: a) upgrading of black urban areas and of special significance to this particular strategy are the Cillie Commission 1986 and the Riekert Commission of 1997. b) deracialising official and public life by the removal of racist legislation eg. the Prohibition of mixed marriages act and the immorality act which were both repealed in 1986; c) control the urban black population through the creation of regional authority structures under the indirect control of the state; d) redesign the constitutional order by promoting black participation in a form that does not promote any threat to the white

⁴James Farr, Understanding conceptual change politically . In Political Innovation and conceptual change. (Eds) Terence Ball, James Farr, Russel L Hanson. New York, Cambridge University Press 1989.

community. However the central focus of these initiatives were not designed to relinquish power by the Nationalist regime but to manipulate the political system by promoting their concept of power sharing. Robert Price makes very interesting observations in this regard

In the 1980s Pretoria attempted a resolution of this dilemma by proclaiming itself amenable to arrangements of power sharing that would not undermine the white groups capacity to control those aspects of the socio-economic system deemed vital, the industrial economy, the system of socio-cultural reproduction and the security apparatus⁵

Based on this brief analysis, I want to suggest that these intentions of the Nationalist regime have not changed but continue to represent the core of their policy on the whole question of political change. To what extent these intentions have succeeded I leave that to your critical judgment as we go on with our discussion. But my own limited assessment seems to suggest that whilst most of their intentions have failed, their basic commitment not to relinquish power has not changed.

Unfortunately there seems to be a general impression, especially in Church circles, that the regime's intentions for change are genuine. This is reflected especially in the Rustenberg declaration. This I believe is part of the problem as we begin to assess what the role of the church should be. Apart from that I have also a hunch that some of our black political leaders may be trapped by the same illusion that there is a commitment for genuine change from Nationalist regime's side. For me this raises many critical questions about the whole question of negotiations, a point I will return to later.

The challenge to formulate or develop a liberation ethic must be acutely aware of the political dynamics of our situation. One of

⁵ *ibid.* Price, Robert.

the goals of a liberation ethic is to provide moral guidance particularly to the black oppressed in their efforts to dismantle the system of domination. Such a liberation ethic is not just based on principles of justice alone but is geared to a kind of political praxis whose goal is to promote authentic liberation. This commitment to authentic liberation is inspired by indignation produced by the prevalence of unjust structures and, in our context by the system of Apartheid under the guise of the reform initiatives of the Nationalist party. This calls for prophetic vigilance the ability to question the basic intentions of those who seek to promote white domination at all costs. In other words, in our present context of political confusion, a liberating ethic must be informed by a hermeneutic of suspicion. Such a hermeneutic I want to suggest, must emphasize that the basic goals of Apartheid system have not changed. That white domination continues to be the precondition of the so called reform initiative. That white political legitimacy and the need to maintain white economic privilege is the bedrock of the De Klerk's political agenda. A liberation ethic must expose the inherent contradictions in the Nationalist regimes agenda, but also the limitations of the political vision of those who are aspiring for political power, especially from the oppressed community. At the centre of this commitment to provide a liberation ethic, is the quest for our political power which demands that we rediscover our authentic humanity. This means developing the capacity to resist and confront those structures that seek to keep us in perpetual bondage. This point is expressed very forcefully by the Kairos Document on the question of prophecy.

prophecy is always confrontational it confronts the evils of the time and speaks out against them in no uncertain terms. Prophetic theology is not afraid to take a stand, clearly and unambiguously. Prophetic statements are stark and simple without being hedged in with qualifications or possible exceptions. They deal with good and evil, justice and injustice, God and the devil.⁶

⁶Kairos Document, p. 18.

One of the problems that we face is that the powers of evil that are reflected in the system have the semblance of reasonableness and openness. In other words, it is difficult to name the enemy. Part of the problem is that the system apart from coopting people from our black communities is also luring certain black leaders to participate in the program of their self enslavement, under the false notion of power sharing. This is why when certain leaders call for resisting the state through mass action there are disagreements within the black oppressed community. What is so revealing to me, as we agonise over the present political impasse, is that the tactics of divide and rule are being used so effectively by the state.

This inability to confront the structures of oppression is reflected in the Rustenberg Declaration which states:

3.3 To political leaders, we express appreciation for the progress made thus far and we address an appeal that you must urgently negotiate a new just order for our country. We call on the government to repeal as matter of urgency all apartheid laws⁷

The tone of this statement is extremely problematic for it reflects the political naivete that the governments intentions are good. That the church should grant the state the benefit of the doubt whilst the atrocities perpetrated by the security apparatus of the State continue. As we gather here more and more of our people are being killed not in the white suburbs but in the black communities. I believe the challenge, as we develop a liberating ethic whose goal is radical social transformation, is to rediscover the ability to name the enemy, the ability to name the monster that is destroying our black people. Part of the major weakness about the Rustenberg Declaration is a lack of a clear and decisive identification of who the enemy is. This I want to emphasise is the major focus of any liberating ethic, the ability to name source of injustice and to do something about it. It is in this context that the

⁷Rustenberg Declaration p. 281.

Kairos Document is clear:

To be the enemy of the people a government would have to be hostile to the common good in principle. Such a government would be acting against the interest of the people as a whole permanently ..

... That leaves us with the question of whether the present government of South Africa is tyrannical or not. There can be no doubt what the majority of the people of South Africa think. For them the apartheid regime is indeed the enemy of the people and that is precisely what they call it, the enemy"⁸

I am sure there are those who will argue that the context and the circumstances under which the Kairos statement was made have now changed because political prisoners have been freed, exiles have returned home and negotiation have taken place. My response is; that may be so, but as the bible reminds "Beware of false prophets, who come to you dressed up as sheep while underneath they are savage wolves. You will recognise them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:15-16). I believe this popular text refers to the hidden intentions of those who claim to promote the common good especially for those who suffer. Here we discover a wonderful example of a hermeneutic of suspicion which is the basis for any liberating ethic. A liberating ethic must promote a sense of radical scepticism, one based on critical social analysis of the political context and a commitment to dismantling Apartheid.

I have decided to revisit the Kairos Document inspite of its inherent problems because of its commitment to social praxis and a calling for a clear identification with the victims of oppression and injustice, also inviting the christian community not simply to make pronouncements but to engage in the struggle for liberation. This means we are called to assess how is the church in the

⁸The Kairos document p. 23.

present context is involved in the struggle. How is the church in solidarity with the victims of the ruthless violence that is destroying many of our black people? How is the church at this present time providing moral guidance to the black people? Is the Rustenberg Declaration the answer? Is it the recent code of conduct promoted by the South African Council of Churches the answer? Where does the church stand on the current political impasse? Is going back to negotiations the answer? Many people say yes, but there are those who say under what conditions? Who should take the initiative to resolve this current situation? Again the Kairos Document provides an interesting insight which must be interpreted in the context of this present political context:

The people look to the church, especially in the midst of our present crisis, for moral guidance. In order to provide this the church must first make its stand absolutely clear and never tire of explaining and dialoguing about it. It must then help people to understand their rights and their duties. There must be no misunderstanding about the moral duty of all who are oppressed to resist oppression and to struggle for liberation and justice⁹

As we seek to develop a liberating ethic we must respond to this challenge. What does it mean to provide moral guidance as the church at this particular time in our struggle for a true democratic society? What is the basis of this liberating ethic?

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF A LIBERATING ETHIC

1. From my perspective a liberating ethic must reflect the emancipatory interests of the black oppressed. It must be in touch with their pain, but apart from that it must seek to express their sense of moral outrage at the system which keeps them in perpetual bondage. But to speak about the black oppressed people

⁹Kairos Document p. 30.

in South Africa is becoming problematic, because the enemy has succeeded to divide our ranks, creating a serious sense of identity crisis. I raise this issue here because the racial dynamics and character of our struggle are being undermined. But we need to realise that the legacy of racism under the policy of Apartheid is going to haunt us for a very long time inspite of aspirations by some for a non-racial, non sexist society. A liberation ethic must revive a sense of solidarity amongst the black oppressed people so as to remain vigilant and aware of the hidden agenda of the Nationalist party. The recent issue around "Die stem" is just a tip of the iceberg, reflecting what is to come, but more than that exposing the tenacity and determination of a racist ethos that has shaped the outlook of so many white South Africans for a long time. One of the great lessons from the black struggle of the late sixties is that the quest for authentic identity and humanity is the driving force for any worthwhile struggle to die for. This means a liberation ethic must seek to revive a sense of mutual destiny amongst the black oppressed people as part of the larger struggle for a democratic society. What this implies is that the oppressed must put their house in order and forge a united strategy to finally dismantle the system of Apartheid.

2. A liberation ethic must be informed by a critical social analysis one which unravels the question of power relations as they impact socio economic structures of our society. Such analysis must be sensitive to history of both the nature of racial and capitalist formation that has shaped our society. That the quest for liberation must be to create a just democratic order for all. However such a consideration must seek to address the competing interests of various groups as they seek power and privilege, a source of great conflict in the South African society. Such a liberation ethic must address the violent manifestations of this conflict in the South African context as a product of the ongoing legacy of Apartheid. For one of the critical questions of our time is who is responsible for this violence and what will it take or involve to stop it? It is in this respect that we need to consider the insightful observation of Mike Morris and Dough Hinson in their informative paper on South Africa: Political Violence, Reform and Reconstruction:

The political causes of the violence must be more deeply conceptually grounded than simple political rivalry between Inkatha and the ANC. What is involved here are three interrelated issues; the breakdown of the previous mode of regulating the political cohesion of the society; the changing role of the state in containing the antagonisms generated by Apartheid; and the emergence of competing power centres at all levels of society struggling to establish new forms of political hegemony¹⁰

This is the kind of analysis that should inform our social analysis and I trust during our discussion we will have the opportunity to come back to some of the issues.

3. A liberating ethic must be grounded in a radical faith whose fundamental thrust is the preferential option of the poor and black oppressed people. This means the faith perspective that is to inform this ethic must arise out of the black religious experience of suffering. In the South African context this will mean standing in solidarity with the victims of oppression. As Donald Dorr puts it:

To make an option for the poor involves (as the word itself indicates) making a choice. A first step in exploring this choice I want to examine its presuppositions. The option is an act of faith which only makes sense in the particular way of interpreting the world. It presupposes that we see the world as a battle field where the many little struggles we face each day are part of a much more comprehensive confrontation between the forces of good and the forces of evil.¹¹

¹⁰Mike Morris & Doug Hinson, South Africa: Political Violence, Reform and Reconstruction in Review of African Political Economy No 53: 43-59 ROAPE Publications Ltd 1992. p. 49.

¹¹Donald Dorr, The Social Justice Agenda, Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church. Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1991. p. 105.

A liberating ethic makes a choice as it seeks to provide moral guidance for the poor and the black oppressed people. This preferential option of the poor must be informed by a re-reading of scriptures as a commitment to discern the will of God (1 Peter 3:8-17). The challenge, as I understand it, is to respond particularly to verse 5 of 1 Peter 3 "But hold Christ in your hearts in reverence as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence when anyone challenges you to justify the hope which is in you". The challenge is to reaffirm our commitment to resistance as a black christian community at this time of political crisis? What theological vision informs this liberating ethic? When these issues are addressed faithfully in the context of the struggle and resistance the church rediscovers her liberating mandate for a new social order.

4. A liberating ethic in our present context must be informed by a strategy to transform the present political context. Miguez Bonino raises very critical questions about this, questions that are very pertinent to our situation, when he writes:

How can people who have introjected oppression over centuries of domination (including religious domination) be so helped to an awareness of themselves and their dignity as to conceive a historical project of liberation (and how can the consciousness of those who are blinded by the ideology of domination be unblocked - liberated for a participation in the struggle of the poor?¹²

As I try to respond to this question, I am inclined to believe the level of consciousness amongst the black oppressed people about the need to dismantle Apartheid is very strong. However this consciousness needs to be channeled to explore radical solutions. The current anger, destruction and violence seem to suggest there is a serious problem, which must be addressed by the black community as it seeks to dismantle the system of Apartheid. The kind of political praxis that is adopted by the oppressed must be

¹²Bonino op.cit p. 161.

informed by a vision of struggle and a commitment to a just democratic order. A liberating ethic must spell out what this vision of struggle is at this time. But what about those who are blinded by the ideology of domination? Here I think of our black compatriots in this country. How do we invite them to be part of this vision of hope. Do we demand a need for radical repentance? Or do we provide a space where they can reclaim for themselves a vision of the struggle that will open the door for them to be in solidarity with their oppressed brothers and sisters? This is the challenge which I hope we will discuss in this conference. For the struggle of a new democratic South Africa is the struggle for all South Africans. But what will it take to enable the oppressors and the black oppressed people to find a new path together in creating a new social order. Bonino asks yet other important questions:

Do we have any ethical guidelines-pointers, criteria to guide our action. So far as the possibilities and costs of social change are concerned?

In the long and painful process, how are personal and communal meaning, integrity and fulfillment made possible? How can personal life be meaningful when there is no visible success in the historical task to which one is committed?¹³

These are very tough questions, but for me this means turning to the black religious experience and African wisdom. We have to rediscover that value of *ubuntu*, which entails a sense of mutual respect, harmonious social and interpersonal relations, stability kindness, humility, openness, benevolence, gentleness, communal justice and a tradition of resistance. All of which enhance our authentic identity and humanity. These core moral values find expression in the life of the liberating christ. For it is in him that we discover the meaning and the abundance of life. How does a liberating ethic succeeds to embody this vision of a political understanding of *ubuntu* is a challenge for us all.

¹³Bonino, *ibid.* p. 101.