

# THE RELEVANCE OF BLACK THEOLOGY\*

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IT IS NOW almost five years since the phrase 'Black Theology' has been tossed around in the South African theological circles. What is significant about it is that its appearance has aroused anything from positive interest to alarm even outside the theological arena, especially among politicians. This proves beyond doubt its timely relevance: it speaks to the point and does not equivocate about the Christian Faith as it relates to all levels of human life. In other words, in its practical implications it leaves nobody unaffected. The touchstone of any relevant theology is that it must set people to re-examine and re-assess their presuppositions of understanding the Christian faith in relating to pertinent problems and challenges. Whenever and wherever this happens, this is a sign that theology is fulfilling the task as a critical instrument of the ministry of the Church.

A significant theological enterprise has never been totally without some elements of personal sacrifice to those who set it in motion. Early church theologians like St. Paul had to go to prison for daring to challenge the prevailing religious and political institutions through the new theological notions of the 'lordship of Christ' and 'Christian discipleship'. It is important to note that most of the early martyrs were theologians or 'doctors' of the Church. Apart from the apostles, in this category belong Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Cyprian of Carthage, and others. When those who have been called 'young in faith' begin to give theological expression to their faith in Jesus Christ, they do not deserve being suppressed and silenced through the means of political power, but, wait to be encouraged and if need be challenged in the normal medium of theological dialogue. In other words, whoever wants to quash Black Theology, should do so theologically, and not politically. Let me move to the question of its relevance in South Africa.

## 1. IN RELATION TO THE QUESTION OF COLOUR.

Names get their significance from the concept that stands behind a particular name. They are tags that point to distinctions one can make between concepts bearing different names. There is no name or phrase whose significance is so transparent that one is able to see the concept behind it in a priori fashion. Therefore failure to understand or asking about the meaning of words and phrases is something not unnatural. I would consequently not be surprised if people have misunderstood and even distorted what is behind the phrase 'black theology'. As long as misunderstandings are a phase in the quest for and process of understanding, this is something healthy. It only becomes regrettable if one becomes so dogmatic about the misunderstandings one entertains as to attach rigid consequences to them. Just for the sake of illustration; a week or so ago, I read in one paper a report about a suggestion that Black Theology is a part of some hideous conspi-

racys that is designed to install 'black socialism' in South Africa. Even though I did not understand what was meant by 'black socialism', I did get an impression of how far distortions and misunderstandings can go.

Black Theology, as far as I use the phrase, stands for a theological contribution in a situation such as ours in which there is a destructive obsession with the principle of the colour of one's skin. Far from being a casual thing like length and size, in South Africa colour has been elevated into a critical decisive principle of social, economic and political order. Tall and short people, fat and thin people can have a common social and political destiny, but black and white are being separated because of their colour.

It is only a church that has lost its bearings which does not recognise the consequences and the theological problems raised by this obsession with colour. Black Theology in its interpretation of the matters of the Christian Faith tries to call the attention of the Church to these problems. I will refer to these problems under other headings later. May it suffice at this stage to say that we have become so used to attaching social, economic and political consequences to the question of colour that our consciences have become dead to the attendant theological implications. Black Theology tries to awaken our consciences. I admit that, like the painful experience of repentance, our awakening will not be entirely without the experience of remorse.

## II. IN RELATION TO A HERETICAL ECCLESIOLOGY.

According to the message of the Bible mankind becomes a body in Christ. In Christ the 'separate development' initiated by the confusion of the Tower of Babel becomes resolved. In other words unity in Christ becomes the new starting point and not the division of mankind in the Tower of Babel. The Church derives the shape of its life not from the divisions of sin but from the unifying salvation in Christ. In Christ points of human identities and differences serve the enrichment of fellowship in the body of Christ and not its disruption. The church cannot be properly understood apart from the question of the unity of mankind, under Christ. This is the message of Paul in Romans 5 where he portrays Christ as the new head of redeemed mankind in the place of Adam.

The ecclesiology that is reflected in the patterns of our worship and community life is a heretical one: it is based on the principle of the divisions of the Tower of Babel. The fact that our differences and ethnic distinctions have given rise to separate black and white church structures that have no meaningful fellowship is a sorry tale of how the Church has sold its soul to the ethnic and political gods. The Church has become a conglomerate of exclusive cultural clubs instead of the ship of salvation for all. The call to worship has become a call to 'those of my own colour and race'. As a black Lutheran I am ashamed to say that I have experienced more Christian fellowship among white Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics than from those of the house of Luther.

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There is definitely something wrong somewhere: there is a heretical understanding of the Church based on cultural ethnic affinity. Black churchmen who are the product of the mission labours of your grandfathers are horrified by this ecclesiology and would like to share with white Christians their own understanding of the Christian Church under the inspiration of the Bible. They cannot understand why the ideology of Apartheid has become part of the Lutheran tradition and are convinced that discrimination and the unnatural packaging of Christians into racial church boxes is a damnable heresy. They accordingly call the Church back to the doctrine of the Apostles.

### III. IN RELATION TO THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL.

#### 1. Black People's Mission in South Africa:

It is well known that practically all the credit for the spread of the Christian faith in South Africa thus far goes to white people. Whatever contributions black people have made, has been in the context of subordinate and subsidiary roles. For a sound mission outreach you need for it the backing of a sound theology. And this is what Black Theology is about. It aims at equipping black people with a theological perspective as they play a creative role in meeting the needs of all the peoples of South Africa, according to the will of God. This needs the recasting of some of the theological presuppositions regarding the question of human identity.

It is well known that South African history has enshrined negative elements which have impressed upon white people that they are superior and upon black people that they are inferior. The fact that Africans, Indians and Coloureds, have been collectively referred to as 'non-whites' in official terminology suggests that they have the identity of non-persons who exist only as negative shadows of whites. In a theological sense this means that they were created in the image of the white man and not of God. I am aware of the fact that many people never think of the theological significance of calling us non-whites. The practical consequence of this 'non-white' theology is that the 'non-white' can be satisfied with the 'shadows' of the things which white men take for granted when it comes to their needs. Hence black people have not had a meaningful share in the substance of the power and wealth of the land; they were treated to the shadow of the substance. There is therefore a need for the substitution of a 'non-white theology' with a 'black theology' or a theology of the image of God in order to put the question of human identity in a proper theological perspective.

It will only be from this perspective that black people will discover their God-given potential which will enable them to stand in a creative relation to white people. In this sense Black Theology is a theology of mission perspective.

#### 2. The Gospel of Liberation:

In confirmation class I was taught that 'Gospel' means good news. I did not fully understand what this meant as I am beginning to understand it now. Good news is what you want to hear after the situation has become more and more unbearable. You want to hear that there is a way out. Salvation is therefore a way out of bondage; it is liberation.

People often say that this country has difficult problems whose immensity foreigners often fail to grasp. They argue that South Africa needs more time. For what? I often wonder. For more laws that complicate the issues or for a real way out? Others have warned that time is running out.

What accounts for the irrelevance of the church in the situation is that it is also part of the problem. It is as much in need of liberation (way out) as the society it is expected to liberate through the Gospel. In seeking security in racist tendencies and the structural models of Apartheid the church

has sacrificed the freeing power of Christian fellowship and imprisoned itself in the political moulds of the very society it is expected to serve. The church has become so locked up in the political prison that even a slight reference to the normal things the church should be doing is construed immediately as preaching politics. If one Sunday morning I went to attend service in one German Lutheran Congregation in Natal, I would be accused of creating a 'political incident' and stirring up racial trouble. This is no longer a normal thing because the church has become a political satellite. Consequently I have never even tried it. If I have any strong desire to have fellowship with white Christians I would rather go to a Catholic, Methodist or Anglican Church. This explains why even though I have preached a number of times to white congregations of these denominations, I have never in my life preached to a German Lutheran congregation, except in West Germany, of course. Don't you feel that there is something wrong somewhere? I do, and many black people feel the same. That is why they are now articulating a Black Theology which is a theology that will liberate the Church into the real body of Christ.

What about the Christian liberation of all the people of South Africa? The black quest for theology has a bearing on this too. You know just as well as I do that the problem of security overrides all other national issues in this country and that security laws are among the harshest in terms of punishment meted to the individual who happens to fall their way. When people of South Africa feel the need for security, this is a legitimate quest.

But what kind of security? Security from what? Has it ever occurred to you that security is what the Gospel is about, and that theology has a definite role to play in this regard? Black Theology has a contribution to make here. The theological basis for security is Christ's atoning work. It is Christ's act of bringing reconciliation between God and man which accounts for security.

Reconciliation is security—the opposite of disquiet and apprehension that results from the awareness of the existing belligerent state of affairs. In so far as a security problem exists only as long as there are two parties, the threat and the threatened. A deliberate creation of the state of reconciliation is the only reasonable solution short of mutual annihilation or the destruction of the imagined threat by the threatened.

As the Gloria in Excelsis of the Angels put it, the birth of Christ ushered in a new possibility of security on earth. Instead of the word 'security' the bible speaks of 'peace on earth'.

Without reconciliation there can never be security. This is the message which a liberated church must preach to a society that wants to be liberated into a sense of security. It is because whites have rated reconciliation as such a low priority that insecurity seems still to be the order of the day in spite of all laws and arms. For many decades blacks have been seen as a potential danger to whites, hence the coining of the phrase 'swart gevaar'. The programme of the segregation of blacks from whites has been a desperate attempt to invest white people with a sense of security. Distance was imagined to be a healthy medium of security. On the other hand, any physical fellowship between black and white was seen as a major threat to the security of the white man. It is just here where the Church got trapped into abandoning its prophetic role. It forgot the biblical truth that the only sure foundation of security in our country is mutual forgiveness which yields the security of knowing that the one who was my enemy has now become my friend. Hence white people have not been liberated into this awareness. Black Theology addresses people of South Africa to the true liberating security of the Gospel.