Black theology in public discourse
with particular reference to South Africa

by

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1. **Historical context:** What is the historical context in which 'Black Theology' arose? Why was the label necessary, and what did it imply? 'White Theology' was its mirror image. Thus it is impossible to discuss 'Black theology' without reference to 'White theology' with which it was contrasted. Yet the label 'White Theology' was not affirmed, despite the fact that 'White' was accepted and reinforced as a social category. Why was there acquiescence over 'White Theology'? The answers to the issues raised in this section will help to propel future theological discourse in South Africa.

2. **Racial context:** What do the words 'Black' and 'White' stand for? In reality, there are no 'Black' people and 'White' people. There are brown ones and pink ones. Or rather, chocolate-coloured ones and vanilla-coloured ones. Brown and pink are not opposites in the rainbow. They are some among the many colours of the rainbow, but not the only ones! Thus the words 'Black' and 'White' were ideological categories, not biological or theological ones. What is the implication of using theological arguments to support or refute ideological orientations?

3. **Pan-African context:** The term 'Black' is not co-terminous with the term 'African'. The term 'White' is not co-terminous with the term 'European' or 'Caucasian' or 'Aryan'. This is one of the reasons why the Negritude movement lost intellectual fervour, and why Nazism was condemned. What do the terms 'African' and 'Pan-African' stand for? This is a vital question for all Africans at the beginning of the new millennium. The Pan-African Movement which has shaped African thought throughout the twentieth century, needs re-definition and revitalization to spur the 'African Renaissance'.

4. **Geographical context:** 'Black Theology' found formulation in two geographical areas which were demographically obverse. In USA, the 'Blacks' were a minority, while in South Africa they were the majority. Should geographical and demographical factors make a difference in the articulation of contextual theology? If so, what difference should such factors make in theological discourse? Most of Brazil is 'Black' in the sense that blackness was viewed in South Africa and USA until 1990. What is the implication of this fact for theology in Latin America in the coming century?

5. **Cultural context:** 'Black Theology' was closely linked with the Black Consciousness movement, both in South Africa and the USA. Would it be correct to suggest that 'White Theology' was also linked with the White consciousness movement? What, in fact is the cultural difference between 'White' and 'Black'? If there are differences, what should be the implication of those differences in the articulation of theology?

6. **Economic context:** Economic factors are inescapable in any theological orientation. This point is highlighted in a variety of ways in all articulations of theology. The glorification of poverty by the affluent often leads to deliberate pauperization of marginal sectors of population, by design or default. What is the appropriate reading of Scripture in a context where a whole continent is pauperized at the same time that it is 'christianized'? What does it mean to say that Jesus has come so that we might have life in abundance? Is this a spiritual affirmation, or an economic one?

7. **Political context:** 'Black Theology' was a theology of 'liberation', both in South Africa and USA. Dialectically, 'White Theology' was a theology of 'oppression'. The dominant biblical metaphor of 'Black Theology' was the metaphor of 'Exodus', while ironically, the metaphor presupposed by 'White Theology' was that of 'Conquest'. For Black Theology, the ideal figure is Moses and the
dominant symbolic event is crossing of the Red Sea, while for White Theology, the ideal figure is Joshua and the dominant symbolic event is the siege of Jericho. What are the appropriate metaphors in the 'post-liberation' era? Reference may be made to J.N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, Nairobi: EAEP, 1995.


9. *Perspectives from systematic theology*: What is the role of theology in shaping public discourse? In particular, what was the role of Black Theology and White theology in shaping public discourse in South Africa? If these questions can be answered, the answers should help to stipulate the role of Christian theology in shaping a constructive society not only in South Africa, but in the whole continent and among the African Diaspora.

10. *Social reconstruction*: The project of social reconstruction is always multi-disciplinary and multi-professional. Theology should make its appropriate contribution in this process, by promoting ethical and spiritual values which are life-affirming and people-centred. What lessons can be learned from the polarizations of 'Black Theology' and 'White Theology' in order to transcend these perspectives towards a more inclusive theology for the future?

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