Black theology as public discourse

by

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Rationale

When White people came to our country they had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. They said ‘let us pray’ and we closed our eyes to pray. At the end of the prayer, they (Whites) had the land and we had the Bible.

Though clearly influenced by and initially dependent on North American Black Theology - at least for framing, diagnosing and prophetic language - South African Black Theology arose in a unique local context. It was a context of intensifying Black political and cultural resistance against Apartheid and racial capitalism. In choosing the name Black, South African Black Theology, like the Black Consciousness Movement deliberately and defiantly chose a pejorative term with the express aim of redefining it and pumping it with positive meaning.

With a clear and deliberate race bias for Blacks and their condition under Apartheid’s racial capitalism, Black Theology has seldom meant to be more than Christian theology - only; a Christian theology of liberation. Nevertheless, its scathing and unmistakable critique notwithstanding South African Black Theology is essentially and apologia for the Christian religion and for Christian theology. The anecdote quoted above captures something of the problem as diagnosed by Black Theology. It is the paradox of a severely subjugated people who have nevertheless taken to the religion of their oppressors rather enthusiastically. Even the process of decolonization - where and when it has occurred - has not reduced the apparent Black adherence to the Christian religion. The ‘Bible’ in the anecdote must therefore not be taken literally but as a symbol of the entire package of which the Christian religion - as transmitted mainly by the West to Africa in the past three centuries (including the current one) - consists. Built into the anecdote is the suspicion that there might be a logical and coherent connection between Black poverty (material and spiritual) and Black adherence to Christianity. Equally taken for granted here is the ‘foreignness’ of Christianity to Black people. However, the suspicion of possible connections between Black adherence to the Christian religion and Black ‘poverty’ not only in South Africa but also on the continent is not the monopoly of Black Theology. Almost all African Christian theologies have expressed the same suspicion - albeit in different ways. However, it is true that the suspicion has been ‘experienced’ most acutely and expressed most eloquently in South African Black Theology.

Although Christian in methodology and focus, Black Theology has always had intentions beyond ‘the four walls’ of the Christian Church on the one hand and the realm of the merely religious on the other. Therefore, if Black Theology was not public in its effect it was definitely public and political in its intent. Besides, it is most likely that Black Theology became ‘private discourse’ more by default than by design. It became ‘private’ because it was - and still is - not hegemonic. As a subversive theology Black Theology appears to be ‘private discourse’ but has it ever been anything but public discourse in reality? How do marginal and subversive theologies become public discourses? Do, should and can they ever?
‘Some solutions’

Fastening on the ‘Bible and land’ anecdote I wish to identify a few responses to the paradox suggested within Black Theology. The most radical response belongs to a relative minority of African theologians who either doubt whether its is worthwhile for Black theologians to pose as ‘apologists’ (however disguised) or as overt ‘evangelizers’ for the Christian religion at all - given the possibility of the ‘connection’ between Black Christian adherence and Black poverty. For this group of theologians the way forward is to disavow the Christian religion completely and to show its dangerous but essentially inferior status. Secondly there are of course those who have either dismissed the possibility of any ‘connection’ at all or those who have put the ‘connection’ down to abuse, error, misinterpretation, misunderstanding or misapplication. For this group a ‘proper’ and ‘correct’ interpretation, understanding and application of the Christian religion set things right. Thirdly, there is the suggestion that given the very real possibility of the ‘connection’ between Black Christian adherence and Black poverty, the Christian religion and/or the Bible must be re-fashioned into a formidable weapon in the hands of oppressed Black People instead of allowing the Christian religion to ‘prey’ on the largely unsuspecting masses. Fourthly and closely related to the foregoing is the suggestion of ‘using the Bible to get the land back and get the land back without losing the Bible’.

The two (three?) phases of Black theology

It can and has been argued that South African Black Theology could be divided into two phases. The first phase starts with the formation of the Black Theology Project by the University Christian Movement in 1970 while the second starts in 1981 with the establishment of the Institute for Contextual Theology. In the phase one, Black Theology, though acknowledging Blackness to be state of mind, nevertheless took objective Blackness as its starting point in such a way that all Black people were the focus of liberation and the whole Bible (Christianity) could be used for liberation. In phase two, objective Blackness, in and of itself, is no longer sufficient. Not all Black people are the focus of Black Theology. Not all theology done by Black people is Black Theology and not all of the Bible (Christianity) is liberating. Furthermore while phase one Black Theology was closely linked to the Black Consciousness philosophy, phase two Black Theology recognized a wider ideological ferment within the Black Theology movement. Most distinctive of the second phase has been the increasing introduction of Marxist historical materialism in the hermeneutics of Black Theology. After the momentous political events in South Africa -starting with the unbanning of previously banned political organizations in February 1990 and culminating in the historic general elections of 1994 - have we grounds for positing a third phase for Black Theology? This question becomes even more pertinent when we recognize that there was a global momentum to the changes experienced in South Africa since the 1990s. [This is not meant to deny the significance of local developments in the unfolding of events in South Africa]. But if such a third phase is to be posited - how shall it be drawn? Part of the problem in drawing up its contours is that we are living in and through it.

Tentative agenda for phase three

From the second half of the 1980s several items have been thrust upon the Black Theology agenda - both from within and from without. The first ‘item’ to be put forward mainly from outside Black Theology, in various ways, on a few occasions has been the pronouncement that Black Theology was either dead, redundant or overtaken by ‘events’. There have been two basic reasons advanced for these kinds of pronouncements, namely the perceived ‘popular shift’ from Black Consciousness as a political strategy to Non-Racialism and the demise of Apartheid. A possible third reason for pronouncing Black Theology dead is the sheer difficulty of race-talk in a political situation where race is no longer supposed to matter.

However, I think the agenda for phase three Black Theology must be harvested first and foremost from within Black Theology itself.
(a) From the early 1980s Black Theology has acknowledged the *multiplicity of ideological positions* and political strategies in the construction of Black Theology. However, in making this acknowledgment, Black Theology cannot ‘go back’ to a time when commitment was not yet recognized as the first act in theology. Therefore, the multiplicity of ideological and political frameworks will not be allowed either to become a ‘cover-up’ and thereby obscure the commitment of any given brand of Black Theology.

(b) While *race* has always been an important category in Black Theology, *gender* has also irrupted onto the Black Theology agenda in the past ten to fifteen years. While gender is becoming more and more fashionable in South Africa - its racial component should not be forgotten. Nor does the demise of Apartheid spell an end to racism and racist exploitation. In fact it might mean that racism becomes more ‘sophisticated’.

(c) Without abandoning the notion and language of liberation, Black Theology can no longer pronounce on liberation in meta-narrative and kerygmatic terms. Its (Biblical) hermeneutics for the past ten years have shown how unsatisfactory and how elusive such an approach might be.

(d) The foregoing point notwithstanding, Black Theology has sought to place a high premium on *solidarity with the poor* and not with the state or its organs - however democratic and benevolent such a state might be. This theological positioning must not be mistaken with a sheer anti-state stance. Black Theology is first and foremost not about the powerful but about the powerless and the silenced.

(e) Another ‘item’ that has come up several times in Black Theology discussions during the past decade or so is the question of African Independent Churches (AICs). For Black Theology this matter is not unrelated to (d) above. Several Black Theology conferences have identified AICs as a significant interlocutor for Black Theology. Although some tentative steps have been taken, this is a task still to be done.

(f) Like the AICs, Black Theology reflections have identified African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as an area needing attention. This should link well with the currently fashionable ‘multi-faith’ dialogue in South Africa. Unfortunately, it is (predictably) a dialogue which largely excludes African Traditional Religions. A serious interest in ATRs is one of the most constructive ways of not only bringing Black Theology into the ‘religious dialogue’ debate but also of affording Black Theology another chance of demonstrating solidarity with the poor - for ATRs is the religion of the poor in this country.

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