

The role of black liberation theology: A refocus on race

Dr Hlulani Mdingi

Systematic and Historical Theology

Faculty of Theology and Religion

Black liberation theology emerged in the 1960s behind the backdrop of the Black Power movement and various formations of black power and black consciousness movements. Prior to the emergence of black consciousness, African life took a new orientation through Pan-Africanism, the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the civil rights struggle in the United States, the independence of many countries, and the prospect of decolonising Africa in solidarity with the Third World. The change that Black Power brought involved aspects of psychology, economics, notions of beauty (aesthetics), intellect, culture and faith in relation to the challenge of oppression on both national and international stages. Although Black Power met with a backlash from white society and has even been wrongly labelled “reverse racism” and “black supremacy”, Black Power was an articulation of self-determination, self-worth and confrontation. Cone (1985: 768) argues:

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The rise of Black Power created a decisive turning point in black religious thought. Black Power forced black clergy to raise the theological question about the relation between black faith and white religion. Although blacks have always recognised the ethical heresy of white Christians, they have not always extended it to Euro-American theology. With its accent on the cultural heritage of Africa and political liberation “by any means necessary,” black power shook black clergy out of their theological complacency.

It is this climate that made theology and the liberation paradigm critical in thinking about God and the existential condition. In South Africa the conception of blackness was not based just on skin pigmentation (although that was an integral and critical factor). What was at work was an inclusive definition of blackness in relation to understanding white privilege and group power politics. At the core of black consciousness BC philosophy was a grasp of how white privilege, ethnic categorisation and serious superficial divisions operated to

disempower the oppressed. BC's position was the understanding that power lies in the hands of privilege givers who choose and categorise who belongs, and which class they belong to (this was done based on the interests they (privilege givers) can obtain from any group). Biko (1978: 52) argues: "We have in our policy manifesto defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition are politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in South African society who identify themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations." It is against this backdrop that black liberation theology in South Africa emerged; black theology would not be merely a hermeneutical tool but also an epistemological and methodological tool to re-orientate in theory and praxis faith and hope that is participatory in real concrete life. Maimela (2005: 29) argues:

Black theology, like all other theologies of liberation, is a phenomenon that should be understood against the social context of pain, humiliation, degradation, and oppression to which people of colour (especially of African descent) were subjected in North America and South Africa.

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The pain and humiliation of blacks found solidarity in both despair and hope on the cross. Thus, the cross is not merely a soteriological symbol for the Christian faith, but also a persistent symbol enacted and visible in those who have suffered and continue to be the crucified of the world. Cone (2011: 2) asserts about the cross: "There was no place for the proud and the mighty, for people who think that God called them to rule over others. The cross was God's critique of power – white power – with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat." Therefore, black theology became an existential reading of the text and a belief in God as the God of the oppressed. Boesak (2004: 56) noted that black theology brought a message of the gospel to our people and in light of their situation. The existential dimension of this form of theology does not evade questions of race and suffering, which is critical in current conditions to ensure that we are engaged in critical and constructive dialogue and in mapping out routes to transformation and justice and understanding the root causes of our struggle.

Cone (2004: 142) asserts: "White theologians and philosophers write numerous articles and books on theodicy, asking why God permits massive suffering, but they hardly ever mention the horrendous crimes whites have

committed against people of color in the modern world.” Cone’s analysis also makes clear the foundational and complementary values that black liberation theology and decoloniality share, inasmuch as both involve developing one’s own epistemology, hermeneutic, praxis and focus. Black theology accepts that colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and institutional racism are critical aspects of the project of modernity and embody the values of individualism. This individualism is an egoism often typified by the “I” that is indifferent to the constant death for those who are on the underside of modernity and history (see Vellem 2017: 8). The aim of attempting to civilise the “heathen”, “savage” and “subhuman” who is the pigmented native has resulted in a shattering of the communal African worldview. Western “civilisation” and its exploitative and individualistic drive has resulted to a psychological shift that results in the current, cold and materialistic worldview (see Biko 1978: 106) that necessitates a direct and radical confrontation.

Black theology in the United States and South Africa ventures into the symbiotic relationship between race and class, at least in seeing the historical development of capitalism. Cone has noted that black theology found a friend in Marx for economic reasons. Cone (1975: 39) argues: “The importance of Marx for our purpose is his insistence that thought has no independence from social existence.” He asserts (1975: 39): “A serious encounter with Marx will make theologians confess their limitations, their inability to say anything about God which is not at the same time a statement about the social context of their own existence.” For liberation theology and black liberation theology, social context is inseparable from thinking about one’s existence, faith and current institutions; it measures how far we have come in dealing with race and its continual presence in the world. West (1999: 86) argues:

The idea of white supremacy is a major bowel unleashed by the structure of modern discourse, a significant secretion generated from the creative fusion of scientific investigation. Cartesian philosophy and classical aesthetic and cultural norms. Needless to say, the odour of this bowel and the fumes of this secretion continue to pollute the air of our postmodern times.

The role of race in South Africa is not new, given that the history of the country has borne witness to intrinsic networks of race and racism in almost all aspects

of the social formation of our current societies and our persistent struggles. However, the battle for a more equitable, inclusive and equal society requires constant interrogation and analysis of our condition to curb malpractice and discrimination based on race, class or gender. Cornel West (1999: 70), writing from the North, correctly argues:

The idea of black equality in beauty, culture and intellectual capacity remains problematic and controversial within prestigious halls of learning and sophisticated circles. The Afro-American encounter with the modern world has been shaped first and foremost by the doctrine of white supremacy, which is embodied in institutional practices and enacted in everyday folkways under varying circumstances and evolving conditions.

Biko (1978: 96) asserts:

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There is no doubt that the colour question in South Africa politics was originally introduced for economic reasons. The leaders of white community had to create some kind of barrier between black and whites so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification for the obvious exploitation that pricked even the hardest of white consciences.

Both Biko and West are correct in pointing out the vast intellectual and economic impact of race on society, specifically for previously disadvantaged people. However, BC and black liberation theology in South Africa involved a new paradigm: a paradigm that enabled understanding psychological bondage, what it meant to be treated as sub-human, and the pathology of subservience, and specifically its economic implications. Through the promotion of BC and black liberation theology in Christian faith communities, the church and its theology were challenged to be constantly engaged with society. Black liberation theology today requires ongoing engagement with the past and present. Furthermore, black liberation theology and, by extension, decoloniality and decolonialisation grasps that racism is about power, and not just about racial slurs and unpleasant incidents. Cone (1997: 15) argues, "Our theology must begin with the socio-religious experience of the oppressed." This insight doesn't ignore incidents of

racism and discrimination, but understands that such incidents occur because of untransformed structures and because of the system. Today black theology needs to be engaged in all facets of life, including commenting on policy, definitions and acts of racism.

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