

**LIBERATING WHITENESS:  
ENGAGING WITH THE ANTI-RACIST DIALECTICS OF  
STEVE BIKO**

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**1 INTRODUCTION**

In an eloquent passage unmasking the unacceptable role of white liberals in the struggle against apartheid Biko (1978:89f) said:

To us it seems that their role spells out the totality of the white power structure – the fact that though whites are our problem, it is still other whites who want to tell us how to deal with that problem. They do so by dragging all sorts of red herrings across our paths. They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one. Let them go to van Tonder in the Free State and tell him this. We believe we know what the problem is, and we will stick by our findings.

A statement like this is the tip of an iceberg, involving many underlying assumptions. I don't propose making a detailed contextual exegesis, but use it as a starting point for this paper on how to overcome racism in the white community. I agree with the view of Biko – and van Tonder in the Free State – that South Africa indeed has a problem of racism, and that this problem has not gone away completely after fourteen years of democracy and human rights. Unlike Biko in this quotation, I do not deny that there is also a class struggle going on, but however intricately the dimensions of race, class and gender oppression are interwoven, I believe it is necessary to look at

racism as a form of oppression with its own inner dynamics, which therefore needs to be examined specifically as a problem in its own right. We will do well, however, not to isolate racism from sexism and classism, since reductionism in social analysis leads to narrow, exclusive strategies, which often do not enable us to make headway in overcoming oppression.

In this paper I analyse Steve Biko's view of racism and respond to it theologically as a white South African, in solidarity with the liberating intention of black consciousness. It is not possible to give a full-blown theological response to black consciousness in one paper. That would require the use of all the dimensions of a praxis cycle.<sup>1</sup> I limit myself mainly to analysis but also touch briefly on the dimensions of identification (insertion), theological reflection and strategising (pastoral planning).

## **2 BIKO ON RACISM AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT**

### **2.1 Understanding racism**

First I must analyse how Biko (and the Black Consciousness Movement) defined racism, because it is the key to their whole approach. Biko defined racism as "discrimination by a group against another for the purposes of subjugation or maintaining subjugation" (Biko 1978:25). For the sake of completeness one should explicate what is implicit in the definition: "on the basis of biological characteristics that are identified as racial." From a black consciousness viewpoint an important distinction is that between racialism (or racial prejudice) and racism. Racialism is understood as personal dislike or discomfort with people who are biologically ('racially') different from yourself – sometimes called individual racism (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967:4); racism, on the other hand, is a power arrangement embodied in economic, social and political systems, also called institutional

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<sup>1</sup> The 'pastoral circle' was constructed with four dimensions: insertion, social analysis, theological reflection and pastoral planning (Holland & Henriot 1982). I use an adapted version of it, which I call a praxis cycle (Kritzinger 2002; cf Karecki 2005).

racism (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967:4f). The difference between the two concepts is the power dimension.

That is why Biko insisted that the black consciousness (BC) strategy of withdrawal from non-racial organisations, following the slogan “Black man, you’re on your own”, is not racist (racism in reverse). He argued that one cannot be racist unless one has the power to subjugate. And since black people at the time were responding to the overpowering white racism from a position of social, economic and political subjugation and suffering – as a strategy to develop a positive consciousness and to mobilise themselves for their own liberation – such actions could not be construed as racist.

## 2.2 Dialectics

Directly linked to this is Biko’s interesting use of dialectics. He wrote:

For the liberals the thesis is apartheid, the antithesis is non-racialism, but the synthesis is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution. Black Consciousness defines the situation differently. The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore the antithesis to this must, ipso facto, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place (Biko 1978:90).

In short, the thesis is white racism, the antithesis is black solidarity and the synthesis is a true humanity. We should be careful not to read too much into Biko’s dialectical scheme, as if he were using it in a technical Hegelian or Marxian sense. It is also important to heed scholars like Ter Schegget (1977:37), who claim that dialectics (both in Hegel and Marx) is primarily a

method, an analytical tool, rather than a description of history or a dogmatic prescription for action.

On the other hand we should also not read too little into it. To my mind, Biko's use of dialectics has a few implications. First, in a dialectical approach concepts or theories arise from the reality of struggle and not in a safe space of reflection somewhere above or beyond it. This dialectical scheme was not devised as an interesting explanation or interpretation of South African society; it was meant to mobilise black people for a particular kind of liberating action.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the concepts of blackness and whiteness are not fixed, essentialist or ontic,<sup>3</sup> but dialectical – interacting dynamically towards transcending (overcoming) this tension and the dawn of 'true humanity'.

Biko most likely adopted his dialectical interpretation from J-P Sartre's *Black Orpheus* (1976:60), in which he introduces the work of the *négritude* poets of West Africa:<sup>4</sup>

Négritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Négritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the blacks who employ it well know it. They know that it serves to prepare the way for the synthesis or the realization of the human society without a breakdown. Thus Négritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is passage and not objective, means and not the ultimate goal.

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<sup>2</sup> In that sense Biko's dialectics is 'Marxian', following Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have always interpreted the world; it is our task to change it."

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars, particularly in the USA, prefer the term 'ontological' to 'ontic'. An ontic (or ontological) category refers to the order of being and purports to convey something about the fixed essence or true reality of a thing or person. That is why I use the synonym 'essentialist' to clarify its meaning.

<sup>4</sup> Mainly Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas.

One could question the aptness of Sartre's use of the words 'negativity' and 'weakness' in his interpretation of *négritude*, but one has to agree with the basic thrust: the view of blackness as aimed at overcoming the polarity between whiteness and blackness, between oppression and suffering. Biko probably adopted Sartre's dialectical language to convey his understanding of the liberating role of black consciousness.

Before exploring Biko's dialectics in greater depth it may help to summarise his view of racism as explained thus far:

- The dominant problem in South Africa is racism.
- Racism is a system of oppression,
- which can only be overcome when it is seen as the thesis of a dialectics
- opposing the strong antithesis of black solidarity,
- leading to the synthesis of a true humanity.

### 2.3 "True humanity"

One way of analysing Biko's dialectics is to approach it from the perspective of the synthesis towards which it was moving. His choice of words to describe this envisaged new society is interesting. He calls it a true humanity, "a true humanity where power politics will have no place" (Biko 1978:90); "a South Africa with a more human face" (Biko 1978:98); an open society where there will be "free participation, in the economic, social and all three of the societies by anybody, ... equal opportunity and so on" (Biko 1978:123); "a land where black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation" (Biko 1978:51).

What is abundantly clear from these descriptions of the envisaged synthesis is that Biko was not anti-white. He was fiercely anti-racist but did not regard white people as inherently evil or beyond redemption. In fact, he was hoping and working for a synthesis between black and white as the outcome of the dialectics that he construed – by empowering and mobilising oppressed black people to put pressure on white racists structures 'from below'.

What, then, is the difference between Biko's vision of a future South Africa and that of white liberals? The latter were working for integration and believed that the best way to make it happen was to embark on interracial integration at once. For Biko this meant integration on white terms. He also used the term 'integration', but for him (and SASO) true integration cannot take place on white terms:

[T]here shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society as determined by the will of the people ... One cannot escape the fact that the culture shared by the majority group in any given society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society. This need not cramp the style of those who feel differently but on the whole a country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style (Biko 1978:24).

It is interesting to note the shift in Biko's language. He says that integration must be on *African* – not *black* – terms. That happens frequently when he speaks about the envisaged future. For example:

We intend to see them [white people] staying here side by side with us, maintaining a society in which everybody shall contribute proportionally (Biko 1978:121).

[When] I was at high school, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda was still a militant ... His often quoted statement was: "This is a black man's country; any white who does not like it must pack up and go" ... We knew he had no right to be there; we wanted to remove him from our table, strip the table of all trappings put on it by him, decorate it in true African

style, settle down and then ask him to join us on our own terms if he liked (Biko 1978:69).

I am not here making a case for separation on the basis of cultural differences. I am sufficiently proud to believe that under a normal situation, Africans can comfortably stay with people of other cultures and be able to contribute to the joint cultures of the communities they have joined ... aspects of the modern African culture – a culture that has used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics (Biko 1978:45).

The new situation envisaged by Biko was not a continuation of the old. It was a transformed society, in which white people would be welcome if they were prepared to let go of racism, learn to respect black people and sit down side by side with them at a table decorated in African style, not claiming any special privileges on their own terms but joining on African terms, and contributing proportionally to the well-being of all. It seems, then, that 'African' was one of Biko's key terms to describe the synthesis of this dialectics, the true humanity towards which he was working. Whereas 'blackness' applied primarily to the antithetical element of his dialectics, 'African' applied more to the synthesis.

But Africanness also antedated the dialectics, in the sense that African societies existed and flourished before colonialism brought European explorers and settlers to the shores of this continent, long before colonial racism (and eventually apartheid) called forth the dialectical response of black solidarity. Biko refers frequently to African cultural values and their importance (e.g. Biko 1978:40ff) for building black consciousness and mobilising the struggle against racism. And yet Biko's view is genuinely dialectical in the sense of something new happening in history; the envisaged synthesis is not simply a return to a pre-colonial state. It is a movement to a new Africanness beyond racism, but at the same time not unaffected by the European cultures that have entered Africa. In this regard

Biko (1978:41) says that African culture was battered (but not destroyed) in the encounter with 'superior' Western culture, and yet a certain degree of acculturation did take place in the process, giving rise to modern African culture that has "used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics" (Biko 1978:45).

This is the true humanity or the truly open society, which according to Biko (and SASO) "can only be achieved by blacks" (Biko 1978:132), but in which whites are welcome on the conditions set out above.

### **3 WHITE RESPONSES TO BIKO AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS**

Having briefly described Biko's understanding of racism and his dialectical strategy to overcome it, I sketch three prominent white responses to his views in order to provide a context for my proposal to liberate whiteness. The three white responses to the message of Biko and BC that I wish to look at are: rejection; sympathy, solidarity.<sup>5</sup>

The most common way in which white theologians rejected BC and Black Theology was to ignore it. The silence, ignorance and indifference among white South Africans when it comes to the views of Biko and Black Theology remain disturbingly high, even today, fourteen years after the advent of democracy. But there is also open rejection of BC, as expressed by Afrikaner theologians like Pont (1973:24): "In actual fact Black Theology is ... a radical reduction and falsification of the biblical gospel. It could perhaps even be typified as a shallow, Marxist and optimistic anthropology with a few theologically sounding footnotes attached to it" (our translation).

Another common white response to the views of Biko and BC is sympathy. This is expressed by white theologians who approach BC with humility, aware of the suffering caused by white racism and working for interracial understanding and

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<sup>5</sup> I analyse these three white responses to Black Theology in greater detail in Kritzinger (1988:259-274).



reconciliation. This approach is often accompanied by condescending paternalism, suggesting that the activism and idealism (or radicalism) evident in BC should be guided into healthier channels (e.g. Crafford 1973:46). 'Reactionary' Black Theology should be "guided towards the formation of a healthy African Theology" (Crafford 1973:37) (our translation).

The last type of response that I cite is solidarity. It differs from the previous one in that it is not primarily concerned with airing reservations about Black Theology or guiding it in a healthier direction, but with taking BC as a challenge and stimulus to develop a liberating praxis and theology for and among white people, in solidarity with Black Theology. It affirms the liberating thrust of Black Theology and seeks to develop a complementary liberating ministry in the white community. This is the approach that I adopt in this paper, in continuity with some earlier publications (Kritzinger 1988, 1991, 2001).

My own solidarity with BC developed from growing awareness of racism since my days as a university student in 1969, when I first became friends with black people as equals.<sup>6</sup> As a young Afrikaner I experienced emotions of anger and shame when I became aware of what the apartheid system – designed and driven by 'my' Afrikaner leaders – was doing to black people, who were becoming 'my' people. As a young minister in the Reformed Church in Africa, working mainly in Indian group areas in the late 1970s and early 1980s, my views gradually radicalised. When I started as a lecturer at Unisa in 1981 I met articulate proponents of Black Theology like Simon Maimela, Bonganjalo Goba, Mokgethi Motlhabi and Takatso Mofokeng, who became treasured colleagues and from whom I learnt much about theology, politics and life. In 1983 I read *I write what I like* (then a banned publication) for the first time, and it made a lasting impression on my life and thinking. In 1988 I completed my doctoral thesis in missiology on the topic "Black Theology – challenge to mission", supervised by David Bosch and Simon Maimela.

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<sup>6</sup> For the story of my growing awareness of racism, see Kritzinger (2001).

Having left the Dutch Reformed Church, in which I grew up, in 1975 to become a member and minister of a black church I became increasingly alienated from the mainstream Afrikaner community. When I was young I often resented being an Afrikaner, but as I grew older I realised that there was no point in denying it. In fact, I became aware how important it was to affirm my Afrikaner roots and to acknowledge my privileged past with all the benefits it had secured for me. I was not a perpetrator of blatant racism under apartheid. By the grace of God I discovered at the age of nineteen that apartheid was fundamentally wrong and unchristian. So I started worshipping in black congregations and working with black colleagues and friends to articulate a Christian witness to unity and justice in an oppressive and divided land.

However, that did not make me black or take away the fact that I was a beneficiary under apartheid. I had economic and educational privileges and many other opportunities that were not available to black youths my age. That is why I (still) call myself white, to express that my identity was racialised – against my will – by the power structures of apartheid. Yet I heard Steve Biko's message as an invitation and a challenge to be another kind of white person, to be liberated personally from racist language, attitudes and actions and to join the struggle against racist laws, political structures and social systems. I shall now analyse that call to liberation for white perpetrators and beneficiaries of racism.

#### **4 LIBERATION OF OPPRESSORS**

Even though the BC message was not directed to the white community, it would be truthful to say that its praxis was aimed at the liberation of both the oppressed and the oppressors. Biko's dialectics in fact means that the one cannot happen without the other: both thesis and antithesis are overcome or transcended in the synthesis. Desmond Tutu (1983:4) clearly expressed this liberating BC view when he wrote: "We are committed to Black Liberation because thereby we are committed to White Liberation. You will never be free until we

blacks are free.” This meant that white liberals were not so much evicted from blacks-only organisations in the heyday of BC but rather ‘sent home’ to work for their own liberation – and that of the whole white community – from racism: “[A]ll true liberals should realize that the place for their fight for justice is within their white society. The liberals must realize that they themselves are oppressed if they are true liberals and therefore they must fight for their own freedom” (Biko 1978:25).

However, many white liberals did feel rejected by the BC strategy. To understand this it may help to realise that the political strategy of Biko and BC was collectivist or communitarian, whereas that of white liberals, especially young students on university campuses, was more individualistic. Young white students in NUSAS who identified with the suffering of black people under apartheid were often cutting themselves off from their parents and families (committing class suicide, as it was sometimes called) without feeling implicated in or responsible for the evils of the apartheid system – even though they were benefiting from that system daily as privileged white South Africans. Over against this denial of (or escape from) the guilt of racism by white liberals, Biko quoted the view of Karl Jaspers, a German psychiatrist and philosopher, of metaphysical guilt: “There exists among men, because they are men, a solidarity through which each shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world, and especially for crimes that are committed in his presence or of which he cannot be ignorant” (Biko 1978:23).

Biko took this reference to Jaspers from *Black Theology and Black Power* (Cone 1969:24) in a passage where he exposes the inadequacy of the white liberal response of social integration on white terms and of deliberate evasiveness when it comes to the question of what should be *done* about racism. He then makes the telling observation (quoted from Cone 1969:24) that “white racism is only possible because whites are indifferent to suffering and patient with cruelty meted out to the black man” (Biko 1978:23). The liberation of whites from *their* imprisonment to racism involves a farewell to innocence (as Boesak 1978 has it) and the acceptance of moral and political

responsibility for the racist injustice perpetrated around them, even if it was not perpetrated *by* them. Cone (1969:24) quotes a longer section from Jaspers:

If I do not do whatever I can to prevent them [= crimes committed in my presence, JNJK], I am an accomplice in them. If I have not risked my life in order to prevent the murder of other men, if I have stood silent, I feel guilty in a sense that cannot in any adequate fashion be understood juridically, or politically, or morally ... That I am still alive after such things have been done weighs on me as a guilt that cannot be expiated.

These words were written two years after the end of World War II (Jaspers 1947), by a sensitive German intellectual trying to come to terms with the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the name of all Germans. One can sense his struggle to find words for his guilt and shame about the holocaust and the millions of other dead across Europe.

Biko (following Cone) used Jaspers's notion of meta-physical guilt to indicate that white South Africans – be it Van Tonder in the Free State or Suzman in Houghton – needed to be liberated in the first place from indifference, apathy and innocence in order to accept their share of the guilt of white racism. This is liberation, not from guilt but from innocence, to a sense of guilt and responsibility. Clearly Biko did not understand this as a sick, paralysing guilt complex, because he associated it with white liberals fighting for justice and for their own freedom within the white community.

Underlying Biko's dialectical vision, as noted already, is the assumption that both blackness and whiteness are not ontic or essentialist categories. This point needs further elaboration. In his *Beyond ontological blackness* Victor Anderson (1995:14) says: "Under ontological blackness the conscious lives of blacks are experienced as bound by unresolved binary dialectics of slavery and freedom, negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white, struggle and survival." If we see whiteness and

blackness as essentialist or ontic categories that fundamentally and permanently define who we are, then we remain stuck in a static or destructive binary opposition between oppressors and oppressed, with no way forward. Then we perpetuate racism, because we keep feeding the beast – until it devours us.

Racial identities have been taught to us by our society; they are identity markers that were foisted on us by the legalised racism of apartheid. Put differently, in the language of Althusser, we were 'interpellated into' these identities and can therefore learn to respond to other, healthier interpellations. They are socially constructed entities and we should not wear them as badges that identify us permanently. I believe we should follow Biko in viewing them as dialectical categories that mobilise us into anti-racist activism so that we can transcend them and attain a truly human society.

Having briefly analysed Biko's dialectical understanding of racism and his concomitant view of the role of whites in the struggle for justice, I now develop my concept of liberating whiteness as a solidary response to his thought.

## **5 LIBERATING WHITENESS**

This heading is deliberately ambiguous: whiteness needs to be liberated, and whiteness can be liberating. I argue that one can develop a sense of whiteness that has a constructive, liberating effect on other white people in overcoming racist attitudes, actions and structures. It is debated in African theology whether it is still useful to speak of liberation, or whether liberation discourse should be replaced with reconstruction discourse (cf. Villa-Vicencio 1992; Mugambi 1995). My approach is that we need to theologise in continuity with the liberation tradition and that liberation should not be construed narrowly as either exclusively political, violent or Exodus-based. For me the unique legacy of BC lies precisely in the integration it propagates between personal liberation ('consciousness'), religious conversion, cultural transformation, economic empowerment and political mobilisation. So liberation and reconstruction should be

interpreted, not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as complementary perspectives.

Another preliminary remark: this proposal of a liberating white consciousness and commitment is a *response* to the challenge and invitation of BC and Black Theology. I emphasise this because it strikes me as fundamental that the initiative to overcome racism must start from below, from the (former) victims of racism. In the same way that the struggle against sexism has to take its cue from what self-aware and assertive women are saying and doing about the discrimination they have experienced (and are experiencing), those who wish to play a role in eradicating racism need to take their cue from the initiative taken by liberated/liberating and reconstructed/reconstructing black people to overcome this system of injustice. This is not meant as lame 'bending over backwards' or sycophantic subservience to black initiative. Rather it is an argument for the epistemological privilege of victims of oppression to understand the nature of the oppression and design strategies to overcome it. It is always difficult for (former) oppressors or the beneficiaries of a system of oppression to understand its inner dynamics and devise workable strategies against it, at least if those strategies entail mobilisation of the suffering community and not charitable actions from outside (or above). It is possible to repeat all the white liberal mistakes of the 1960s and 1970s, thus learning nothing from history, if one does not heed the radical BC critique of shallow and patronising strategies employed against racism. This is the abiding relevance of Biko's philosophy for getting white people to turn the corner when it comes to racism.

## 5.1 Whiteness

This section must start with a reaffirmation that whiteness, like blackness, is not ontic or essentialist in nature. When I speak of whiteness, and affirm that I am white, this is a social construction, an acknowledgment that in South Africa my identity has been racialised by our peculiar colonial and apartheid history. But precisely because this identity is socially and politically constructed it can be changed – and keep on changing. Melissa Steyn (2001:xxvi) refers to the consensus that “Whiteness Studies” produced about the ‘normative invisibility’ of whiteness in Western scholarship:

As the privileged group, whites have tended to take their identity as the standard by which everyone else is measured. This makes white identity invisible, “even to the extent that many whites do not consciously think about the profound effect being white has on their everyday lives” ... In sum, because the racialness of their own lives is edited out, white people have been able to ignore the manner in which the notion of race has structured people’s life opportunities in society as a whole.

The dominant (and therefore usually unnoticed) sense of whiteness into which most white South Africans were socialised as they grew up expressed the “Western colonialist master narrative with all its assumptions of the superiority, special entitlement, and unique destiny of European peoples” (Steyn 2001:xxvii). It is this ‘innocent’ and unaware (but powerful) whiteness that is interrupted, punctured and challenged by BC, provided white people are willing to expose themselves to it.

There is widespread resistance among white South Africans to talk about race, often arguing that we are ‘past this’ and need to ‘move on’. I believe Steyn (2001:xxxii) is correct when she says:

If the structures of feeling that informed the old South African institutions are to be dismantled, an approach that takes cognizance of the long-term effects of colonialism and the concomitant processes of racialization is essential ... The construction of race has been used to skew this society over centuries. If we prematurely banish it from our analytical framework, we serve the narrow interests of those previously advantaged, by concealing the enduring need for redress. To deal with the expressions of power, we have to call it by its name.

Let me conclude this section by saying that admitting to whiteness is not the same as being racist, because there are many different forms of whiteness. In fact, the purpose of this paper is to develop a liberating (anti-racist or post-racist) approach to whiteness, in response to the challenge of Steve Biko and black consciousness.

## 5.2 Hybridity

An important dimension of a liberating whiteness is to deconstruct the hegemonic white identity of colonialism and develop a hybrid identity which integrates the divergent impulses that shape life and community in post-apartheid South Africa. One can break down essentialist constructions of whiteness only through the discovery and affirmation of such hybridity, a key concept in post-colonial discourse: "No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (Said 1993:407).

White racist discourse, however, created the illusion of a homogeneous identity, defined as a power position over the black 'other'. In her research, Steyn (2001:127) found white narratives of identity since 1994 moving "beyond the safe home of their whiteness ... a tale that negotiates the space, sometimes a psychologically perilous space, between collective cultural



identities, courageously trusting in the emergent and uniquely syncretised identity forming in that liminal space". Negotiating this space produces consciously hybrid narratives of identity, but Steyn (2001:141) points out that hybridising does not mean 'becoming black' or stepping into someone else's process. Instead these new narratives urge whites to enter into a dialogic, appreciative, committed relationship with the continent that whiteness came to conquer (Steyn 2001:145). This produces a sense of whiteness that is no longer pure but "blended, blatantly contradictory, and complex" (Steyn 2001:147) and struggles with the new power relations playing themselves out in society. These approaches are not producing a new grand narrative of white identity but a range of "*petit* [small] narratives", often overlapping and competing in their attempts to construe new ways of being white in post-colonial Africa.

### 5.3 White Africans?

Biko anticipated the developments sketched above with remarkable foresight and inclusiveness when he spoke about integration as whites being invited to an African table and about not cramping anyone's style in the process. The difficult question, however, is whether it makes sense to speak of white Africans or Euro-Africans. Since National Party politicians like Pik Botha declared themselves to be Africans even before 1994, this claim was greeted with some scepticism by many.<sup>7</sup> In what sense can white South Africans meaningfully call themselves Africans? Here too Biko can help us; for him it is in the synthesis – flowing from the dialectical confrontation between thesis (white racism) and antithesis (black solidarity) – that a society with a human face emerges. And such a society is mature and self-confident

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. the words of Snyman (2007): "Identity has become a battleground with prominent whites proclaiming their Africanness and an African reluctance to receive them with open arms. There is a reason for this: the power of whiteness has never been critically analysed within whiteness itself. As long as a discursively produced whiteness is taken for granted as natural and masked, claims to Africanicity would be received with some scepticism. Having said this, it should be noted that keeping people within racial categories denies a reality of people moving across racial borders to form multiple social belongings."

enough to accommodate a modern African culture as well as the other styles of people sharing one African table shaped by an inclusive Africanism.

However, it is not obvious that such a synthetic consensus will be reached among and between South Africans at large. The following exchange of ideas that took place between April and June 2007 among a few South Africans on the blog of a person calling him/herself “tsotsi-taal” is revealing. The topic under discussion was “Who is not African?”<sup>8</sup>

Really now lets be honest, can Afrikaans and any other African invaders be accepted as true and honest Africans? I'm African because Africa is in my blood, skin and soul NOT because I'm in Africa (tsotsi-taal).

How sad that you waste your time quibbling about who is African and who is not. I should think I am white because I was born white and I am African because I was born in Africa and live in Africa ... Why not do something constructive for this country and its people rather than break barriers. Is it “proudness” of Africa that make you want to divide it's people? (Roer).

Is there any black Europeans? It seems that no matter how many generations of blacks are born in Europe none of them are able to call themselves European. Someone please come up with one example of a black European. Then we can talk about white Africans (big man!).

Of course about the whole French soccer team is black. Are you going to be the first person to tell Thierry Henry that he is not French and not Euro-

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<sup>8</sup> I made a selection from the posts on the blog and did not edit the grammar or correct the spelling.

pean? In rugby there is Serge Betsen and one of the greatest French stars were Serge Blanco. No black Europeans? I doubt it. I think it's been a while since you've been in Europe! (boerinballingskap).

If I am not African, because I am white, then what am I? Should we then send all the whites back to Europe and America, and if we should, then all the black people in other parts of the world will need to come back to Africa. I'm sure the successful black Americans can't wait to come to South Africa and experience crime and racial prejudice by the different black tribes for themselves. My family has been on this continent since 1755. They've helped build this country as well, and by the way I do not come out of a racist household. I'm an Afrikaans speaking Afrikaner African. I love this continent just as much as my fellow Africans (oopkop).

whenever you are black they call you african. i was filling forms earlier there was a section where i had to write whether i am african, white, indian or a coloured. as a black person what am i suppose to choose? african right. so let us not debate about this it is obvious. but this is only my opinion (Nomt).  
(<http://www.tsotsi-taal.iblog.co.za/2007/04/12/who-is-not-african/> accessed 3 June 2008.)

This discussion can be analysed from various angles. I only pick a few aspects relevant to this paper. First, the concluding post (by Nomt) highlights the problem that the employment equity discourse (and bureaucracy) has bequeathed on us. In order to assess the progress being made in the redress of the (racially based) inequalities of apartheid, the Employment Equity Act requires South Africans to identify themselves as either African, white, coloured or Indian, with 'black' functioning as an umbrella term for the three previously disadvantaged groups (African, coloured, Indian). The problem with this approach is twofold: (a)

'black' is no longer perceived as a dialectical concept, straining ahead to be transcended in a synthesis beyond racism, but has instead become a collective descriptor of three 'ethnic' groups; (b) "African" is no longer a unifying concept that can draw together diverse groups of South Africans into an inclusive Africanism but has become a sub-set of 'blackness'. It makes no sense to expect white, coloured and Indian South Africans to develop a sense of being African when the forms they fill in every day remind them that they are not. This flies in the face of the best traditions of inclusive Africanism, embodied by Steve Biko (as explained above), Robert Sobukwe<sup>9</sup> and Nelson Mandela, to mention only the leading spokespeople.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, the self-assured claim to be (white) Africans by some of the discussion partners above needs to be tempered. Without affirming an essentialist understanding of Africanness (as in the view of "tsotsi-taal": "I'm African because Africa is in my blood, skin and soul NOT because I'm in Africa"), whites need to move away from basing their Africanness on mere historical claims about how long their families have been in Africa. Indeed, the question is not how long we have been in Africa but whether Africa is in us, whether we identify with the people of Africa in a significant way. The claim to land ownership cannot be the only basis for the claim to permanence in Africa. Private ownership of property in a capitalist economy creates entitlement ('this land belongs to me'), whereas a synthesis beyond racism can only be based on the very different sense of "we belong to this land". If the unresolved land question in South (and Southern) Africa is to be addressed in a just and reconciliatory way, we will need to accept that patterns of land ownership are not innocent or arbitrary. The Land Acts

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Sobukwe of the Pan Africanist Congress produced the famous definition in the late 1950s: "We aim, politically, at government of the Africans by the Africans for the Africans, with everybody who owes his loyalty to Africa and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as an African" (in Gerhart 1978:195).

<sup>10</sup> Pres.Thabo Mbeki could also be mentioned here for his moving and inclusive "I am an African" speech in 1996, but unfortunately many of his subsequent speeches (using 'two nations' discourse) in effect contradicted and cancelled out the inclusive Africanism suggested in "I am an African" (see Gevisser 2007:785).

of 1913 and 1936, along with homeland legislation and the Group Areas Act, systematically racialised land in South Africa in the 20th century, thus putting a racist stamp on it (87% white and 13% black). There can never be meaningful reconciliation in South Africa unless this situation is redressed. For this to happen white land owners need to admit to the historical wrong of land dispossession reflected in the pattern of land distribution. Steve Biko points a way beyond the binary colonialist impasse of white versus black by setting in motion a dynamic process leading to a synthesis based on common Africanism. The much needed realignment of land ownership will never be resolved if tackled only as an economic question of willing buyer, willing seller or as a legal question of expropriation. The future of South Africa is at stake: to undo the injustice of colonial dispossession on the one hand and to prevent the vindictive and economically destructive re-dispossession of land à la Mugabe on the other we need Biko's vision of an integrated South African society with a human face to guide us through the painful negotiations to achieve a realignment of property ownership. If churches cannot help their black and white members identify with this vision and act on it, they will have failed in their mission of reconciliation.

It is abundantly clear by now that the kind of change implied in becoming white Africans is nothing less than a conversion. It involves a new set of values and commitments with far-reaching consequences. Which is why this should be part of Christian churches' ministry to their white members. Such a liberating and Africanising ministry among white South Africans will have various dimensions, but a key component will have to be creating spaces where white and black Christians can meet to discern together what God is doing in their communities and what challenges they need to face together.

An important part of this conversion is that white South Africans learn to accept, respect and support black leaders. It remains one of the most difficult dimensions of converting from a racist lifestyle to inclusive Africanism. This does not mean that black leaders' actions are always right, or that they should be followed blindly. The challenge to a transformative white identity

is to develop an alternative to both the apathy of Afro-pessimism ("Let 'them' do what they like, I will withdraw into my cocoon and make sure I survive as long as possible") and the indignity of sycophantic support (sucking up to black leaders for the sake of gaining or retaining as much influence as possible). It is possible to find a dignified and transformative way of re-authoring one's narrative of white identity in relation to black leadership.

In conclusion, white South Africans are not going to convince anybody that they are white Africans if they do not learn to understand and speak African languages. One of the most glaring symptoms of the colonial nature of South African society is the fact that, three centuries later, only a small percentage of whites speak an African language. It is possible, of course, that whites learn an African language for the purpose of controlling and manipulating black people, as often happened on farms, but that does not detract from the importance of this concrete sign of respect and identification with the people and cultures of our continent. Without it white South Africans could remain trapped in an isolated, increasingly alienated cocoon within the larger African reality.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This paper argued for the ongoing relevance of Biko's liberating dialectics for post-apartheid South Africa in the grip of persistent racism, widespread poverty and unemployment, a devastating HIV and aids pandemic, rampant crime, and (more recently) virulent xenophobia. Its scope was too limited to develop a programme for liberating whiteness, but perhaps such a vision should in any case not be translated into a single programme. Ideally it should take shape in a wide variety of actions, projects and programmes that open up spaces for a post-racist synthesis where we can genuinely live as human beings, beyond racist assumptions, language and power structures, in liberated zones of true humanity. In this way it could become a broad movement towards an inclusive and hybridised African identity, towards a society with a truly human face. There is no better

way to honour the memory of Steve Biko than to live for this liberating vision – for which he died.

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