

MAY THE BLACK GOD STAND, PLEASE! BIKO'S CHALLENGE TO RELIGION¹

Tinyiko Maluleke
College of Humans Sciences,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

At some stage one can foresee a situation where black people will feel they have nothing to live for and will shout out to their God: "Thy will be done." Indeed, His will shall be done but it will not appeal equally to all mortals for indeed we have different versions of His will. If the white God has been doing the talking all along, at some stage the black God will have to raise his voice and make Himself heard over and above the noises from His counterpart (Steve Biko).

1 THE BIKO LEGACY

I am not old enough to have known Biko personally or to have understood him deeply during his lifetime. Nor was I geographically advantaged to have had even distant access to him. When Biko died in September 1977 I was only half his age and just starting high school. His influence on my thinking, however, has been phenomenal. I therefore feel that his legacy is as much mine as it is for others who appropriate it. Periodically the Biko legacy has been the subject of fierce debate with some political parties and Biko's contemporaries were at the centre of it. The establishment of a non-partisan Steve Biko Foundation has, therefore, brought a breath of fresh air to this atmosphere and will hopefully 'free the Biko legacy' from unhealthy contestation. That legacy is important for South Africa and for the world at large.

As an activist social theorist, Biko stands proudly and squarely in the tradition of Frantz Fanon, Martin Luther King Junior, and Malcolm X. In the midst of fierce debate about his legacy – much of which was but an aspect of the struggle against apartheid – it is my view that his unique contributions both to social theory and to the ethics of political activism remain grossly underestimated.

2 FROM SOWETO 1976

I was an enthusiastic but naive participant in the 1976 Soweto uprising. The full political significance of the moment was not apparent to me then. I now know that the outbreak of the Soweto uprising must have been connected somehow to the fact that since 1969 black consciousness had made serious inroads into student thinking. The 1976 uprising also came within a month of Biko's giving evidence in Pretoria² and may indeed have been influenced by his utterances, stance, and impressive poise at the trial.

What was very clear to me then was that the shift from mathematics to 'wiskunde', from history to 'geskiedenis' and from general science to 'algemene wetenskap' was painful, annoying, inconvenient and unacceptable. But for Soweto

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² Lindy Wilson, 1991, 55. Biko was subpoenaed to give evidence in the SASO-BPC trial of 13 (Cooper, Myeza, Lekota, Mokoape, Nkomo, Nefolovhodwe, Sedibe, Hare, Moodley, Variava, Cindi, Ismael, and Sivalingum Moodley), who were arrested and charged after the 1974 Durban rally to celebrate the FRELIMO victory in Mozambique.

students 1977 was in many ways a worse year. Although there had been some schooling during 1976, 1977 was a year in which schooling was such a stop-start affair that for long periods there was in fact no schooling at all. Schools became battlefields between police and students. Throughout the year we played cat and mouse games with the police. To my recollection very few schools actually wrote exams at the end of that year – Lamola Jubilee Secondary in Meadowlands Zone Five, which I attended, certainly did not. Then, later that year, came the news – thanks to newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The World* – that Steve Biko had died in police custody.

Student anger reached new heights and many – especially the older ones (standards eight, nine, and ten) started looking for ways to skip the country to join the liberation movements. Some Soweto students, especially the seniors among us, had heard bits and pieces about Biko and his trial; but it was through his death that many of us ‘discovered’ Steve Biko. Thus, to borrow Biko’s own words, his “method of death [was] itself a politicising thing”.³ Another consequence of the news of Biko’s death was that copies of his articles and essays became sought after and were passed from one student to another. We were both amazed and inspired by someone who, in that atmosphere of fear and intimidation, had decided to talk frankly about the South African situation. It was as if a whole new world was opening up to us. For the first time liberation and freedom felt like attainable goals to our young and angry minds.

When rereading material on and by Biko in preparation for this paper, I was struck by a number of things. First, just how young he was – both when he died and when he bequeathed us, through his writings and his initiatives, testimonies of his keen intellect and his great love for this country and its people. A youth in terms of the South African Youth Commission definition (i.e. up to the age of 35), Steve Biko died. At the age of 25 he was already banned and restricted. But his legacy and contribution is that of a grown man way above his chronological age. Indeed, the revolution Biko led was headed by people in their early twenties, most of whom were banned and restricted by the time they were 26. I consider this a great challenge to the youth of our times.

Second, at a time when black resistance was fragmenting,⁴ I was struck by the fact that Steve was essentially a college student leader who used campus politics to launch a national political agenda. Although Steve is said to have regarded the Soweto uprisings as a complete surprise, his leadership in particular and that of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) in general, appears to have inspired a symbiotic and coherent relationship between college and high school student politics.⁵ This was a remarkable achievement at that time. Remarkably, Black Theology (BT) also came not from the pen or mind of a solitary academic but as a product of the selfsame college student politics, inspired by SASO and born within the University Christian Movement.

Thirdly, I was struck once again by the sharpness of Biko’s mind, breadth of knowledge, clarity of thought, and simplicity of expression. He was also a very well read man. To make the same point in a slightly different manner, SASO, the Black People’s Convention (BPC) and their associate organisations were not just student or community organisations: they also had an accompanying intellectual thrust. In his

³ Biko, in Aelred Stubbs (ed), *I write what I like*. London: Heinemann, 1978, 173.

⁴ Steve Biko, “Fragmentation of the black resistance” in Aelred Stubbs (ed), *I write what I like*. London: Heinemann, 1978, 36f.

⁵ “High school students and township youth groups became involved in the movement as Black Consciousness spread outside universities. Their involvement resulted in the formation of the South African Student Movement (SASM) and the National Youth Organisation (NAYO ... a direct outcome of leadership training campaign by SASO and the Black Community Programmes (BCP)” (Mamphela Ramphela, “The dynamics of gender within Black Consciousness organisations: a personal view”, in Barney Pityana, Mamphela Ramphela, Malusi Mpumlwana, and Lindy Wilson (eds), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, Cape Town: Philip, 1991, 215.

leadership and thinking, in my estimation, Biko ranks alongside such postcolonial thinkers as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Sékou Touré, Nkrumah, and others.

Fourth, I was struck both by the brutal circumstances in which Steve died⁶ as well as the absence of bitterness among those closest to him. The white policemen, in whose custody Steve was during his last days, were vicious and cruel – he was battered, kept isolated and naked for more than three weeks. In that state he was thrown onto the cold floor of a Landrover and driven for eleven hours, only to be dumped and left for several hours on a cell floor in Pretoria.

3 BIKO ON CULTURE, CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGION: THE CHALLENGES

3.1 Black but white-led

In February 1970 Steve Biko, in his capacity as SASO president, wrote a letter⁷ to SRC presidents in which he makes several notable references to the University Christian Movement (UCM), an organisation from which formal BT was to emerge. Biko calls the UCM “a religious group concerning itself with ecumenical topics and modernisation of archaic Christian religious practice”.⁸ He noted with delight that the UCM – established in 1967 – had a black majority within one year of its existence. However, Biko⁹ was cautious:

We believe to a great extent that UCM has overcome the problems of adjustment to a two-tier society like ours. However, we still feel that the fact that the blacks are in the majority in the organisation has not been sufficiently evidenced in the direction of thought and in the leadership of the organisation. We nevertheless feel that the UCM's progress is commendable in the direction of provoking meaningful thinking amongst the clergymen and its members.

He shared his concern about black majorities in the church not turning into leadership majorities with black ministers at a conference in Edendale in a talk entitled, “The church as seen by a young layman”. “It is a known fact that barring the Afrikaans churches, most of the churches have 70, 80 or 90% of their membership within the black world. It is also a known fact that most of the churches have 70, 80, and 90% of controlling power in white hands.”¹⁰ It can be argued that in making this observation, Biko was diagnosing in the church and church organisations the same problem he had observed in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). The absence of black leadership, even in an organisation where they formed a majority, was a general social problem. It caused him to walk out of NUSAS and form SASO. Biko was unflinching in his conviction that as long as black people looked for and accepted white leadership in all spheres, including religion, they were not yet ready to take their future in their own hands. This called into question whether the so-called black churches were really black.

It is in this context that we should understand Biko's observation in the opening quotation that “the white God has been doing the talking all along” and that the time had come when “the black God will have to raise his voice and make Himself heard over and above the noises from His counterpart”. It was indeed about much more

⁶ Pityana, *Bounds of possibility*, 80. “On the night of 11 September Biko, evidently a seriously ill patient, was driven to Pretoria, naked and manacled to the floor of a Landrover. Eleven hours later, he was carried into the hospital at Pretoria Central Prison and left on the floor of a cell. Several hours later, he was given an intravenous drip by a newly qualified doctor who had no information about him other than that he was refusing to eat. Sometimes during the night of 12 September Steve Biko died, unattended.”

⁷ Biko, “Letter to SRC Presidents”, 10f.

⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 62.

than just black leadership. It was about the very content and form that the Christian faith had taken in the black community. Black churches were white led in terms of their ethos, practice and outlook.

3.2 “God is not in the habit ...”

To conclude his address to ministers of religion in Edendale, Biko quipped, “I would like to remind the black ministry and indeed all black people that God is not in the habit of coming down from heaven to solve people’s problems on earth.”¹¹ Having inherited this adage in textual form, we are unable to tell whether it was spoken in all seriousness or in jest. But it was not the first time that Biko had made this point. It also appears in an adapted form in his essay entitled “We blacks”, where it was linked with the white liberal “theory of gradualism” that was meant keep “blacks confused and always hoping that God will step down from heaven to solve their problems”. It seems, therefore, that this was an earnest concern of his. It is in fact rather pithy, an apt if also trenchant adage. In the context of the Edendale talk it meant at least two things. First, that black people had to take the initiative if the church was to retain relevance for fellow blacks, especially young blacks; second, that God does not do theology, human beings do and that the time had come for “our own theologians to take up the cudgels of the fight by restoring a meaning and direction in the black man’s understanding of God”.¹²

Biko moreover rejected the tendency to make theology ‘a specialist job’. Indeed, in his introduction to the Edendale address, Biko presented three main aims of his talk: to offer a young person’s perspective, a layman’s perspective, and to make the concept of religion a popular one. His approach, therefore, was to highlight the problems faced by South Africa in general, and by blacks in particular, and challenge church people to use the Bible and their faith to respond in a relevant way. If they did not do anything about it, they should give up any hope of God doing it on their behalf. This was a profound critique of certain forms of religiosity that seemed to encourage an attitude of expecting God to come and intervene on behalf of blacks.

3.3 What to do with the white man’s religion: an agenda for religious liberation

Biko’s basic problem with Christianity was not so much its content as the refusal of those who peddled it to adapt it to local needs and conditions. Worse still, it was used as an instrument of de-culturisation and colonisation. He was therefore fearful that it was fast becoming irrelevant – especially for the young.

Whereas Christianity had gone through rigorous cultural adaptation from ancient Judea through Rome, through London, through Brussels and Lisbon, somehow when it landed in the Cape, it was made to look fairly rigid. Christianity was made the central point of a culture which brought with it new styles of clothing, new customs, new forms of etiquette, new medical approaches, and perhaps new armaments. The people among whom Christianity was spread had to cast away their indigenous clothing, their customs, and their beliefs which were all described as pagan and barbaric.¹³

In my view Biko’s essay “We blacks” lists the most complete agenda for a black response to Christianity – the white man’s religion in South Africa. Central to such a response was the creation of a black theology of liberation. Firstly, he suggests that

¹¹ Stubbs, 65.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Biko, 60.

Africans converted to and practising Christianity should consider the BT proposition and –

- 1 “get rid of the rotten foundation which many missionaries created when they came”;
- 2 move away from focusing on “moral trivialities”;
- 3 revise destructive concepts of sin and stop making people find fault with themselves;
- 4 try being true to Jesus’ radical ministry;
- 5 try and resolve a situation in which, while blacks sing *mea culpa*, whites are singing *tua culpa*;
- 6 deal with the contradiction of a “well-meaning God who allows people to suffer continuously under an obviously immoral system”;
- 7 “redefine the message of the Bible ... to make it relevant to the struggling masses”;
- 8 revisit the biblical notion that all authority is divinely instituted;
- 9 make the Bible relevant to black people to keep them going on their long journey to freedom;
- 10 deal with the spiritual poverty of black people;
- 11 adapt Christianity to local culture;
- 12 stop the use of Christianity as “the ideal religion for the maintenance of the subjugation of people”.

Elsewhere he calls Christianity a “cold cruel religion” whose early proponents preached “a theology of the existence of hell, scaring our fathers and mothers with stories about burning in eternal flames and gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. This cold cruel religion was strange to us but our forefathers were sufficiently scared of the unknown impending danger to believe that it was worth a try. Down went our cultural values!”¹⁴ For a ‘layman’, as Biko called himself, he had a thorough and incisive understanding of the challenges facing theology in the black churches. That may be why Dwight Hopkins¹⁵ described Biko as –

... a theologian from and with the masses of black people. He never became bogged down with strict doctrinal or theological categories of thought or elaborated long-winded treatises. Quite the opposite ... he involved himself in theological issues pertaining to the very life and death of his community.

3.4 Locating our praxis, religious studies and theology in Africa

To take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song, you must fashion the revolution with the people. In order to achieve real action you must yourself be a living part of Africa and of her thought; you must be an element of that popular energy which is entirely called forth for the freeing, the progress and the happiness of Africa. There is no place outside that fight for the artist or for the intellectual who is not himself concerned with, and completely at one with the people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity.¹⁶

By drawing on the work of Touré, Fanon, Malcolm X and Kaunda, Biko wanted to locate his thinking and nourish his intellect in Africa. His notion of blackness was one that included Africanness and African culture. His idea of BT, quite amazingly, did not

¹⁴ Biko, 49.

¹⁵ Hopkins, 1991:195.

¹⁶ Biko quoting Touré, in Stubbs, 35.

totally exclude what has come to be known as African Theology. This is how Biko defined African religiosity, pointing out the discords with Christianity, but always holding out the hope of a fusion in the process of making Christianity relevant to black people.

... We did not believe that religion could be featured as a separate part of our existence on earth. It was manifest in our daily lives ... We would obviously find it artificial to create separate occasions for worship. Neither did we see it as logical to have a particular building in which all worship would be conducted. We believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere. It was the missionaries who confused our people with their new religion. By some strange logic they argued that theirs was a scientific religion and ours was mere superstition ... worth a try.¹⁷

This is a thorough and scathing critique of Christianity – a religion to which Africans turned out of fear rather than joyfully! The contrast between African religion and missionary Christianity are painted starkly as a communal faith pitted against a “cold and cruel” religion. With these words, Biko sought to challenge black Christians to begin making Christianity relevant to the people – changing it from a cold, cruel religion to a warm, communal one. To this end, Biko remained firm in his belief that although the West may excel in military hardware and technology, “in the long run, the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationships ... giving the world a more human face”.¹⁸ These harsh words should not make us think that Biko disregarded or underestimated religion. He believed in the significance of religion, including Christianity, evidenced by his friendship with several priests. For him “all societies and indeed all individuals, ancient or modern, young or old, identify themselves with a particular religion and when none is existent they develop one”.¹⁹ He also believed that “no nation can win a battle without faith, and if our faith in our God is spoilt by our having to see Him through the eyes of the same people we are fighting against, then there obviously begins to be something wrong in that relationship”.

3.5 The BT challenge

Biko’s critique of the church, especially the black church, always included an invitation and a challenge to construct a black theology of liberation. He saw BT as the only way to salvage Christianity for the black masses. Otherwise Christianity would remain an imposed religion whose role was to maintain subjugation – always making blacks feel like the “unwanted step children of God”. Therefore, BT was seen as “a situational interpretation of Christianity [meant to restore] meaning and direction in the black man’s understanding of God”. He therefore advocated waging an intellectual and theological battle within Christianity because “too many are involved in religion for the blacks to ignore ... the only path open for us now is to redefine the message of the Bible and to make it relevant”. Central to making the Bible relevant was the re-visioning and reinterpretation of Jesus as a ‘fighting God’ – the beginnings of a search for a black Christology. Such were Biko’s feelings on the matter that, although he did not provide a complete outline of BT, he spoke tantalisingly and passionately about the sorts of problems such a theology would have to confront.

... one notes the appalling irrelevance of the interpretation given to the scriptures. In a country teeming with injustice and fanatically committed to

¹⁷ Biko, 49.

¹⁸ Stubbs, 51.

¹⁹ Ibid, 60.

the practice of oppression, intolerance and blatant cruelty because of racial bigotry; in a country where all black people are made to feel the unwanted stepchildren of a God whose presence they cannot feel; in a country where father and son, mother and daughter alike develop daily into neurotics through sheer inability to relate the present to the future because of a completely engulfing sense of destitution, the church further adds to their insecurity by its inward-directed definition of the concept of sin and its encouragement of the *mea culpa* attitude. Stern-faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their thieving, housebreaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery etc. ... No one ever attempts to relate all these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of schooling and migratory labour. No one wants to completely condone abhorrent behaviour, but it frequently is necessary for us to analyse situations a little bit deeper than the surface suggests.²⁰

If we earlier quoted Biko's devastating critique of missionary Christianity, his censure here is directed to the practice of the black church. It is the 'stern-faced' black ministers whom Biko is getting at and it is the prevailing and 'inward-directed' concept of sin that he faults. He challenges black preachers to engage in more searching analysis. BT is necessary in order to change this situation. Instead of church practice adding to the burdens of the black masses, the question was how to make the black church and its praxis more supportive of the harassed black populace. The challenge was one of developing a theology that would provide better analytical tools than those used at that time. These, together with the list given above, was the agenda that Biko proposed for BT.

4 CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSION

The wealth of theological insight in Biko's thought is – for a layman – breathtaking. It is remarkable that more than thirty years ago he framed a theological agenda that, in all honesty, we have yet to exhaust. Tribute must indeed be paid to those who took up the challenge: Sabelo Ntwasa, Mokgethi Motlhabi, Nyameko Pityana, Mpho Ntoane, Buti Tlhagale, Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, Simon Maimela, Bonganjalo Goba, Lebamang Sebidi, Shaun Govender, Manas Buthelezi, Gabriel Setiloane, Allan Boesak, and others.

My contention is that none of the challenges I highlight above have been met. Work remains to be done on each of them. Above all, in conclusion, I want to suggest that if Biko and his generation helped us find tools with which to understand the role of religion, the psyche and consciousness in a violent colonial situation, we now need similar but new tools to analyse the role of religion in the postcolony called South Africa, often misnamed a young democracy. A postcolony is still a colony. We find ourselves in a situation in which the colony continues even after the colonial period. We see this in the way women are regarded and dealt with. The violence with which we live is postcolonising all of us, especially women and children. Similarly, the scourge of poverty in a world that has more than enough for all is another sign of the continuation of the colony. We are now faced not merely with the HIV/aids pandemic but with devastating consequences of the interface between HIV/aids and gender, between HIV/aids and poverty. Issues of identity and self-esteem that Biko and his peers occupied themselves with have returned in the form of sexuality and sexual orientation debates of our times. Indeed, I want to suggest that the very fact that our young seem to be forgetting the likes of Biko is a symptom of the problems we do not even acknowledge. In the atmosphere we live in, religion runs a real risk of becoming

²⁰ Ibid, 61.

the opium for both the rich and the poor. Perhaps the challenges that Biko presented to black Christianity can and should be extended to all religions and to all Christianity today. To what extent are our religions revitalising and equipping people rather than undermining their spirits with false promises and blame-the-victim strategies?

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