

**“TAKING BACK OUR STREETS”:
READING STEVE BIKO’S “BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE QUEST FOR
TRUE HUMANITY” ON THE
STREETS OF TSHWANE**

*Stephan de Beer*¹

Tshwane Leadership Foundation, Pretoria, South Africa

1 INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST FOR HUMANITY ON THE STREETS OF TSHWANE

“Taking back our streets!” This is the annual theme of the Tshwane Leadership Foundation, a partnership of churches and communities in our city, and also the theme of our annual community festival, the Feast of the Clowns.

“Taking back our streets!” is used as a metaphor for that which was lost and to reclaim, both personally and collectively, our dignity, our voices, our bodies, our agency; our streets from crime, our parks and public places for our children; our ability to participate in public processes that shape the future of our neighbourhoods.

How does Biko stimulate and/or help us to think through this journey?

Our theme was prompted by a realisation that the dignity of our streets and its people is either slipping away quietly or is stolen brutally, if ever it actually existed.

On 17 February 2007 the front page of the *Pretoria News* (2007:1; also 17-22 January 2007) proclaimed: “Police beat woman into coma”. Below the headline was a disturbing picture of a 17-year old woman being assaulted by police officers until she was unconscious for allegedly resisting arrest. The woman was said to be a prostitute; her assailant was a male police officer.

A third character, a *Pretoria News* photographer, stumbled on the scene, saw what happened and took pictures. The police demanded that he hand over his camera, but he refused and fled. Later that night his apartment was entered by police officers who searched it, telling his girlfriend he would be arrested if he did not hand himself over.

This event was highlighted because a newspaper photographer happened to be involved. Yet it was *not* unlike what happens night after night on the streets of our cities and towns. Where the belongings of homeless people are stolen and burnt by security companies and police officers, where young prostitutes are bribed and women in general harassed. The front pages of daily newspapers broadcast it: cash-in-transit robberies, hijackings, farm murders. But they seldom tell the stories of these countless acts of violence perpetrated against the most vulnerable in society by those supposed to protect them.

It raises questions about the extent to which our human rights culture has brought new freedoms and dignity for the most vulnerable among us. Or are some still more human than others? The story raises issues of gender and class, of social exclusion and marginalisation, of insider and outsider.

Here we have a vulnerable female sex worker, probably already struggling to maintain her dignity, now lying in a coma. And powerful police officers using brute force to subdue her once more, speaking on their mobile phones. And a photographer wanting to capture this picture of the violation of human dignity being threatened for his refusal to keep silent.

A few months earlier, on 2 January 2006, I witnessed two homeless men being beaten and kicked in broad daylight by security guards at the Hatfield Plaza. When I enquired why they needed to use such force they threatened to attack me. And nobody in the vicinity, passers-by or shopkeepers, batted an eyelash. Now, 20

¹ Research Associate, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

months later, the local police station and the South African Human Rights Commission allowed this case to be silently withdrawn, writing to me that they cannot pursue the case since they cannot find the witnesses. Yet they are writing to me at my address, both witness *and* complainant in the case, telling me they cannot find me!

Our streets have become spaces in which humanity is either affirmed or denied. The liberation of 1994 has by-passed many mute victims who make the streets their home. And unfortunately some of them have already given up the quest for true humanity; others made peace with *their* reality as the only experience of being truly human they would ever have: true humanity for them means facing harassment and exclusion on a daily basis. Others resiliently stand tall despite their circumstances, symbolising the capacity of the human spirit to defy and outwit the most evil of threats.

Barney Pityana (1991:256) wrote the last chapter of *Bounds of possibility. The legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. It ends with this question: "What is the new consciousness of the 1990's, now that one particular aspect of the struggle has begun to overcome?"

What is the new consciousness, the new awakening, the new movement that is yearned for, also beyond the 1990s in 2007? Perhaps a prior question should be: what are the new struggles, the new manifestations of violence, the new silences that today condemn people to exclusion, indignity and death, as apartheid and its evil forces did pre-1994?

For as long as millions are still living in abject poverty - in informal settlements, victims of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, refugees and illegal immigrants, homeless and landless people, victims of abuse, of dehumanising materialism and opulence, and a profound lack of meaning - the task of nurturing a new consciousness, the drive to recover and reaffirm all humanity as sacred has not ceased to be important.

What is needed is a consciousness that resists the silences of our time, because we might find ourselves surrounded by new silences accompanied by different and sometimes subtler forms of violence, now directed against the landless and the poor, against women and children, sometimes even in the name of providing a better life for all.

2 RECOVERING BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS FOR NEW AND UNIVERSAL STRUGGLES

2.1 Black consciousness: universal application

Black consciousness is understood to be a philosophy of communal solidarity among an oppressed people. Although Biko's premise was blackness as experienced in South Africa, he deliberately sought to situate his work in a more universal humanist framework (Halisi 1991:103), identifying it as part of a global movement of solidarity with all oppressed people.

The Black Consciousness Movement played itself out against the backdrop of significant new political discourses emerging worldwide (Halisi 1991:104, 108), with New Left experiments elsewhere giving rise to movements that were trans-national and trans-ideological in their common concern for universal human emancipation (Halisi 1991:108).

Pityana (1991:10) suggests, therefore, that appropriating black consciousness in exclusivist terms is problematic and was not its intention. "Wherever it is influencing, shaping and transforming ways of thinking and ways of life, wherever it takes root, there it belongs."

Our challenge today is to engage with dehumanised life wherever it is found, and to foster a consciousness that will address the bondage of both victim and perpetrator. Biko (1988:63) explicitly said that "we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage".

2.2 Black consciousness: contextually defined and redefined

Halisi (1991:100) writes that Biko understood political traditions as social and intellectual constructions shaped by time and place. Thus he respected the wisdom of predecessors without necessarily seeing their contributions as final, but rather as "raw material to be reworked into new forms of awareness" for the here and now.

Race, like politics, is a social construction. Blacks in South Africa shared a common oppression despite their ethnic and class differences (Halisi 1991:105), and this formed the axis around which the Black Consciousness Movement was organised. But the changing state of contemporary South Africa raises questions about the validity of race as the sole defining category today.

Many blacks, also some of those who used to subscribe to black consciousness, are no longer doing politics and living their faith from a position of oppression or exclusion, but from a position of power and privilege. How does this affect the discourse?

Even before liberation Mamphela Ramphele (1991:172-173) observed that "a serious and costly error of the BCM was its failure to recognise that not all black people are necessarily committed to liberation and that the poor are not inherently egalitarian". The assumption that all blacks are/were committed to the ideals of liberation and therefore to the kind of communal solidarity that will facilitate liberation is erroneous.

As far back as the 1960s Biko identified the reality of increasing class differentiation and oppression (Wilson 1991:75). This occurred in the context of the newly created homeland system with its new political elite; the separate parliaments for so-called coloureds and Indians, and the rising working classes organising themselves into trade unions. I am curious about what Biko's observations would have been today when class polarisation is increasingly the order of the day and communal solidarity often a buzzword with little substance.

Liberation movements and theologies always run the risk of being utopian in their expectations, even if that is not their design or intention. Then, once freedom dawns, there is often disillusionment with the reality of it and some of its proponents, who now seem to abandon old values and visions of an alternative consciousness by

succumbing to the lure of the dominant consciousness. And so liberation from old oppression is achieved, but the utopian society that was envisaged remains elusive. And sometimes new forms of exclusion and oppression emerge.

2.3 Black consciousness: continued gift to consciousness- raising movements

Against this background I'd like to suggest that the gifts and principles of black consciousness remain important for the work of raising consciousness:

- The work of fostering *black* consciousness should continue, calling blacks back to solidarity with their communities of origin, as well as black people who are still living with the scars of stolen dignity to a discovery of their own humanity, giftedness and agency.
- Fostering *white* consciousness should continue, in terms of
 - helping whites understand the dilemma of their whiteness in terms of its legacy;
 - guiding white people towards a new solidarity, in which they do not withhold *their* God-given agency but share their resources and capacities in ways that do not control or subjugate but will further the mutual liberation of both black and white
 - liberating so-called liberated whites to embrace their whiteness with greater gladness and less guilt, with a self-definition filled with new and broader content arising from an affirmation of interdependence with the broader human (and African) family
 - helping less affluent whites to discover themselves in terms of their vast potential, “held back not by the power of other people...”, as Biko put it, “but (only) by one’s relationship with God” (cf Pityana 1991:254).
- Having said this, I do not subscribe to an ongoing vision that seeks to segregate black and white consciousness. Different groups might at times need different messages with different emphases relating to the different liberations that are required. Jesus invited both rich and poor to be free, but the one had to climb down from the tree and the other be lifted up from the street. Yet at some point we need to create those dialogical spaces where the two can sit down together to discover a truly *human* consciousness that goes beyond the constructions of race, gender and class.

True liberation of both the oppressed and the oppressors in South Africa will entail a recognition by both parties of the full humanity of each individual, regardless of race, class or gender; it is a process requiring all South Africans to claim for themselves and to affirm for others nothing less than full humanity and dignity. Only when people are at peace with themselves can they live with the strengths and weaknesses of their fellow human beings (Sibisi 1991:136).

- Lastly, the tools and resources of black consciousness could be employed to good effect by new movements rooted in solidarity with different experiences of oppression that might sometimes be trans-national and trans-ideological in nature, such as landless people’s movements, federations for homeless people worldwide, slum dweller movements, and so forth.

3 BIKO'S BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND BRUEGGEMANN'S ALTERNATIVE IMAGINATION: ON NURTURING AN ALTERNATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

I propose reading black consciousness in conjunction with the work of Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann. In his *Prophetic imagination* (1978) Brueggemann contrasts the so-called 'royal' or dominant consciousness with an alternative consciousness (or an alternative imagination) of a preferable reality.

The royal consciousness is the way in which establishment society is structured, their values and internal relationships, and the way in which they think about life. The royal consciousness pretends that nothing is wrong and wants to carry immortality into every situation ... Denial of reality serves the king well, because he thinks he is still in control. He tells himself that everything goes according to plan (De Beer 1999:282).

Like our ward councillor who up to a year ago told us that there was no problem with aids in Ward 60, which is the inner city. Directly after the assault on the young woman by the police officer Mr Jackie Selebi initiated a top-level investigation into the matter. But within days, before the investigation was even complete, he said that the girl was never in a coma, referring to medical records of another woman assaulted two days earlier to substantiate his case.

The royal consciousness "nurtures a numbness that kills the imagination of a new, more hopeful reality". It is "an elitist consciousness shaped by powerful people, often at the expense of the powerless. For the royal consciousness to survive it almost needs the numbness" (De Beer 1999:283).

This is captured in the analysis of South African society in the Kairos Document (1985). The Kairos Document gave expression to the royal consciousness in what they called a "State Theology" (De Beer 1999:283), which "canonizes the will of the powerful and reduced the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy" (Kairos Document 1985:3).

Caught up in the same royal consciousness were churches that were sometimes mildly critical of apartheid, but still lacked depth of social analysis and political insight, leaving the church "in a state of near paralysis" (Kairos Document 1985:14). The Kairos theologians spoke of this as a church theology.

In response to these theologies they proposed what they called a prophetic theology that would propound a much clearer, bolder alternative imagination of a different reality; that would nurture an alternative or a prophetic consciousness, naming what was wrong and evil in the dominant consciousness of the time.

Brueggemann (1978:13) suggests that "[t]he task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us".

This is one of the primary tasks of communities of faith: to resist or replace the royal or dominant consciousness of *no imagination* with an alternative or prophetic consciousness that has a *vivid imagination*.

In post-apartheid South Africa, and in the face of the socio-economic challenges of our urban communities, I want to submit the following question: in how far are the *prophetic* theologies of formal church bodies, ecumenical councils, individual church leaders and local congregations being replaced by *church* theologies characterised by "a state of near paralysis"? I sense numbness, incapacity to offer independent critique, silence in the face of new struggles and oppressions, lack of solidarity with those on the margins of our city.

3.1 Nurturing an alternative consciousness: more than critique - birthing a movement

Black consciousness was an alternative consciousness to that which was promoted and perpetuated by the dominant consciousness of the ruling minority. It offered an alternative vision of life for the oppressed majority.

But a truly alternative consciousness is more than a critique of the dominant consciousness. It is also about “energizing people and communities with the promise of something new and alternative” (Brueggemann 1978:13). This was indeed the work of black consciousness, as it gave birth to a movement that articulated an alternative vision of (black) humanity. Learning from the methodologies of Paulo Freire (1970) and others, oppressed people were conscientised politically through educational, economic and health programmes and a new consciousness slowly emerged and spread from below.

This was also the work of the Old Testament prophets, who not only criticised but also called people to envision something different. In Isaiah 5 the prophet makes a critical analysis of land arrangements that favoured big landowners at the expense of the landless, saying, “Woe to you who add more houses and fields to those you already have. Soon there will be nowhere for anyone else to live, and you alone will live in the land.” But the prophetic imagination breaks through with a clear vision of alternative land arrangements in chapter 65: “People will build houses and live in them themselves – they will not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine.”

In our cities of vast disparity new prophetic theologies are required to guide us to alternative realities by undoing the city of the past.

Black consciousness offered a methodology of education and leadership and a philosophy of awakening that went beyond critique, birthing a movement instead. Learning from this movement’s methodology could in fact radicalise some of our contemporary attempts to wrestle with social exclusion, turning relief and development approaches into social movements that advocate more radical systemic change.

4 NURTURING AN ALTERNATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN 2007, IN CONVERSATION WITH BIKO

4.1 Resisting the death of dignity

Black consciousness emphasised the need for self-pride and an embrace of human dignity among blacks. But on the streets of Tshwane the death of human dignity needs to be mourned and resisted.

In their introduction to *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, Pityana et al (1991:11) expressed their concern, as far back as 1991, about the weakened legacy of black consciousness, the ongoing victim mentality, low self-respect and lack of self-pride.

In the past week squatter structures in the east of the city have been forcibly torn down, the inhabitants beaten up and their money and possessions stolen by members of the SAPS. This despite two earlier judgments against the very same police station and the City of Tshwane, which was party to this, the last being a supreme court judgment by Judge Edwin Cameron ordering the city to rebuild the shacks in the same place. Again both victim and perpetrator fell short of true humanity, the one being denied it, the other refusing to practise it; both failing to experience humanity as a celebration of life in community.

The police officers in the cases I mentioned probably have different standards for those who become their victims and for others. After all, they might argue, the 17-year old woman was just a prostitute, the vulnerable squatters only illegal land in-

vaders. They almost deserve to be treated like this, because they have no dignity to start with.

Issues of self-respect and human dignity are surfacing not only in the multiple small stories of people and neighbourhoods, but also in the dominant discourses of our time, ranging from contemporary political struggles in southern Africa to the rate of corruption and violent crime, the disregard for women and children, the quality of our hospitals, the rage on our roads, the cruel contrasts between material opulence and poverty living side by side (Pityana et al 1991:11).

In birthing new movements perhaps the way to start is by naming the deaths of dignity in and around us, and by taking decisions to resist such deaths.

How will true humanity and dignity be mediated in contexts where people are forced to live in inhuman conditions, in backyard shacks, in slum buildings, under cardboard boxes on the streets?

4.2 Breaking the silence, unmasking the violence

Resisting indignity requires of us to break the silence, to make visible in our city what some want to keep hidden. The Stellenbosch philosopher Degenaar (1990:84) said: "Where violence rules, man [sic] is forced to silence." Black consciousness broke the silence of the 1960s after the banning of formal political movements. In the vacuum of that time it articulated black aspirations. It engaged with violence, says Degenaar (1990:85), by keeping "reason and democracy alive".

Degenaar in a sense makes a distinction between silence and articulation. In the face of violence there is often silence as a result of being intimidated, but there should also be growing articulation by movements committed to overcoming and defeating violence against humanity.

The photographer's pictures would give expression to the violence of that night against a vulnerable young woman. So the police officers tried to silence him. As a culture of silence emerges in some quarters, or a culture of whitewashing, about which the prophet would say, "they say everything is OK, whilst everything is not OK" – as such a culture emerges it raises two concerns:

- our *silence*, which allows violence to go unchecked
- the *silencing* of those who seek to articulate the violence they witness

It becomes a vicious cycle of violence and silence and more violence –

'cause Jesus was homeless
with no place for his head
and Pilate washed his hands
until Jesus was dead.

Until somewhere the silence gets broken ... Breaking the silence pricks the numbness, unmask the denial, awakens the senses. But it is dangerous enough to kill someone like Biko.

How did black consciousness break the silence of the mid-1960s? It created spaces for dialogue and consensus decision making, which were not restricted to a few core leaders but nurtured a broad-based generation of future independent thinkers and leaders for the country (Wilson 1991:74).

In this regard Biko and his contemporaries recognised that the oppressor's most potent weapon was the mind of the oppressed (Biko 1988:108):

[I]ts [Black Consciousness's] methodology was to enable the evolution of ideas to flourish and thereby give a wider range of people the chance to voice opinions, even if some were inarticulate and hesitant at first. Those who lived and learnt through this method and understood it, became a community and took that rootedness with them into whatever area of the struggle they later found themselves (Wilson 1991:50).

The Black Consciousness Movement became a community that collectively broke the silence and learned to articulate an alternative vision.

... his memory would be served best by the growth of a broader consciousness that remains wary of mindless authority, that recognizes that ideas are strengthened through consensus decision-making ... (Wilson 1991:76).

Today communities and movements of consciousness are essential as the only vehicles that can realistically help keep "reason and democracy alive".

This methodology could be applied fruitfully among marginal urban groups – homeless communities, street children, sex workers, refugees and others. As spaces are created in which people can start to articulate their experiences, communities are formed that can collectively break the silence. I visualise peer groups of women in prostitution, homeless people, refugees, affluent people seeking greater economic justice, victims of abuse or violence, all gathering together, supporting each other, learning to break the silence and unmask the violence, until these groups become part of powerful movements that will resist and reclaim their dignity.

4.3 Defining ourselves: a step towards personal freedom

A prerequisite for breaking the silence would be a new self-definition. A key notion in the Black Consciousness Movement's strategy was to help people express their determination to strive towards the "envisaged self" (Wilson 1991:50). The envisaged self was the vision of black humanity speaking out for itself.

Biko taught that blacks should resist being defined by others, or being defined in terms of who they were not (non-white) and should rather assert themselves in terms of who they knew they were, and in terms of being created in the image of God.

Defining yourself is an important first step towards personal liberation and freedom: the ability to resist definitions that others ascribe to you, even if you are a

shack dweller or a homeless person; the ability to see beyond your circumstances and not define yourself in terms of those circumstances.

Does this principle of Biko also speak to me - a white South African in the inner city in 2007 as I seek to define myself, with others, in terms of who and what I think I am and want to be, and not in terms of how others want to define me? Does it speak to communities of people who are homeless, affirming their agency to overcome victimisation? Does it speak to prostitutes, mediating self-respect and human dignity as they try to earn a livelihood, whether we agree with their choice or not?

Could Biko's insistence on self-definition be a liberating resource for all the vulnerable individuals, families and neighbourhoods of our city, assisting them to define themselves in terms of who they want to be, and not in terms of how others define them, or in terms of what politicians and community workers deem to be a better life for them?

Could Biko's legacy inform churches as we recover a self-definition of who *we* are, should be and want to be in post-apartheid South Africa, defining our role in terms of our own prophetic calling without others dictating what our role should be?

Would not civil society do well to draw afresh from Biko and his contemporaries as it seeks to define its role, mobilising new movements, practising independent thinking and leadership, for the sake of the common good?

Halisi (1991:101) suggests that "individuals or communities (always) choose freedom or enslavement". Individuals, neighbourhoods, faith communities, civil society in general choose to be slaves of a dominant consciousness that co-opts and silences us, or choose to be free to be who we are called to be, to do what we ought to do. My daughter's preschool has an official school song that concludes by celebrating the "freedom to just be me".

4.4 Discovering own agency and assets

In “Black Consciousness and the quest for true humanity” Biko defines freedom as “the ability to define oneself with one’s possibilities held back not by power of other people ... but only by one’s relationship to God” (cf. Pityana 1991:254).

Once people grasp that their potential is not determined solely by other human beings but also by themselves in relationship to the Creator who gave them that potential in the first place they can start to operate not as victims, but as agents of their own envisaged futures.

Consciousness should not be seen – and was never regarded by Biko or his peers – as abstract intellectualism but “as a concrete materialism that leads people by their full participation from bondage to liberation” (Pityana 1991:254). It engages people as agents in their own liberation, free to give expression to their own infinite, God-given possibilities.

What will such engagement look like in the case of the young woman in Arcadia Street or her police assailants? In what way will the engagement be the same, and how will it differ? How will it work out when we bring them together in a shared space? What is the agency of the 17-year old woman, and what is the agency of the police officer? And could we help them practise the agency so as to recognise each other’s dignity, or has that become totally impossible?

Biko’s perception and energy freed people psychologically to take their destiny into their own hands ... (Wilson 1991:76).

While millions remain trapped in perceived hopelessness, there is a need for a psychological liberation that will help them reach a stage of asserting themselves and their identities, refusing to allow external agencies and top-down authorities – who often come in the form of past liberators – to determine their destinies.

Local government politics, the crisis in service delivery, ineffectual local councillors who are unable to foster participatory democratic processes, the paralysis of faith communities, the dictates of the market, the growing social exclusion of the poor, the inability of local people to shape their own future and that of their communities – all these leave us with a sense of powerlessness, of impending crisis. We can either wait passively for things to get better one day, or we can acknowledge our own *active agency in history* as communities of faith and as citizens of our city (cf Pityana et al 1991:10; De Gruchy 2003).

For too long inner city and township churches and neighbourhoods hoped for external interventions from white suburban churches, donor agencies or government. And *if* these interventions happen we often wish they had not, because of the paternalistic, top-down and mindless approaches sometimes followed, destroying the last bit of agency a community still thought it might have, often resulting in displacement of the poor and negation of all the good done for and by the communities themselves.

Black consciousness showed how research until the 1960s mostly treated blacks as research objects identified as “victims of racism and exploitation” without stressing their agency in history (Ramphela 1991:161): “(L)ittle attention was paid to the creativity and resilience which underpinned the strategies of survival blacks had elaborated over the years.” Appreciation of own agency and assets will revitalise the stories and resources of resilience and innovation employed by oppressed people to sustain themselves.

Flowing from our self-definition, poor communities and churches should acquire a bolder appreciation of own agency and assets, so when they relate to external partners they do so with a clear consciousness of who they are, who they want to become, and what they envision for themselves. In this way we can build partnerships that are mutually liberating.

The emphasis on agency plays an important role in recent thinking about community development. Even radical activist movements such as community organising in the United States are criticised by veteran organiser John McKnight (2007), who maintains that it perpetuates a victim mentality as communities wait for external agencies and demand that they resolve local problems. McKnight suggests that communities should look beyond organising to mobilising their own local and internal assets. This has evolved into the so-called Asset Based Community Development Approach (www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html), which Steve de Gruchy has integrated with the broader sustainable livelihoods framework (2003). It recognises the own assets that people employ despite difficult circumstances to find innovative solutions to livelihood challenges.

4.5 Towards self-reliance

Discovery of own agency and assets paves the way for self-reliance in communities and churches.

Ramphela (1991:154) writes that black consciousness redefined and recovered community development in South Africa as a possible strategy for liberation. The focus was on building greater self-reliance among black communities, influenced by Nyerere and Tanzania's philosophy of *ujamaa* (Ramphela 1991:154-155). *Ujamaa* envisioned an "economics of affection", building on the assets of traditional structures, that is supportive networks among groups connected by blood, kinship, community and other affinities such as religion (cf. Huden 1983:8)

Emphasis was placed on building capacity among black South Africans "to initiate, control, evaluate, and interpret development efforts relevant to their own needs" (Ramphela 1991:169). Self-reliance was seen as liberation for those who traditionally relied on others to do things for them.

[I]t was deemed essential to promote black leadership and control over the allocation of resources within the black community.

But self-reliance should not be seen as isolation or equated with absolute independence (Ramphela 1991:170). It still requires engagement with other sources of information and resources outside one's own community, both for cross-fertilisation and to nurture collective consciousness and collective solidarities that go beyond the local neighbourhood. It should rather be seen as the positive and actual outcome of effective development.

[D]evelopment work is about the empowerment of people to take greater control over their lives. Symbols of development are important in alleviating misery and creating hope where there is despair. But these are but tools of development and should not be seen as ends in themselves. True empowerment occurs when individuals and communities are able to take control over their lives and effectively participate in processes which lead to outcomes that affect them (Ramphela 1991:178).

This should be used as a measure for faith-based development efforts in Tshwane, but also as a goal: in how far does our development facilitation mediate true empowerment and participation of people in shaping their own lives and streets and futures? Are we imparting appropriate skills and tools for this to happen? In how far do our faith-based communities and churches model self-reliance internally, and in how far do we foster self-reliance in the communities that we work with?

4.6 Resisting individualisation: on communal solidarity and economics

One of Biko's key questions concerned the meaning of being human (Hopkins 1991:198). Biko felt that being human in Western culture meant being an individualist, merely using the community as a steppingstone to the next level of personal accomplishment. By contrast he proposed that the church in South Africa should learn from traditional African religion and culture, which valued community above "endless competition among us" (cf. Hopkins 1991:199).

A contemporary approach to foster consciousness would have to consider how "endless competition among us" is wiping out traditional religious and cultural values at an unbelievable rate. One cannot simplistically equate blackness with communalism or whiteness with individualism any more. Too often the collective and the communal have been superseded by the interests of individual accumulation of power and wealth, and ubuntu has become a convenient term to be used when it suits us.

In 1994 human dignity was mediated by political agency, the ability to vote and determine a political outcome. In 2007 human dignity is demolished or upheld by the ability to access economic opportunity. Sibisi (1991:135-136) suggests that true liberation is economic, because those wielding economic power really determine the outcomes. Those wielding economic power could either facilitate new forms of oppression, exclusion and displacement, or ensure radical liberation, inclusion and place-making.

Takatso Mofokeng (1991:67) seems convinced that the market economy is questioning the fundamental values that sustained the poor throughout the ages, namely sanctity of life, the essence of community and solidarity as a basic way of human interaction. He says that every dimension of present-day society has been penetrated by commodification. Mofokeng also doubts whether the solution is as simple as calling for a return to African values, since much of what used to be known as African has also been affected by the "distorting and perverting power of the market". He does hold, however, that the vision of communality and solidarity remains a key concept in developing local communities and economies that will display a greater degree of self-reliance.

Perhaps that is why Biko later suggested, according to Dwight Hopkins, that capitalist political economics inherently breeds exploitation, which is not exclusively white. Hopkins's own conclusion is that a black theological understanding of humanity can only materialise "in a society where capitalist social relations have been abolished" (Hopkins 1991:199). His argument would probably be that capitalist social relations destroy communal solidarity among all people.

In and around King William's Town and elsewhere various health projects, cottage industries, youth leadership programmes and bursary schemes for students demonstrated what black consciousness believed in and stood for: own agency and assets, self-reliance and dignity, self-definition and communal solidarity, prophetic voice and mobilising movement (Wilson 1991:49). What movements, programmes and communities need to be organised today to resist individualisation and facilitate more communal economies and greater self-reliance?

The shacks broken down in the eastern suburbs were part of more than 2.000 shacks built on vacant land owned by the city council. This land (80 hectares) is adjacent to a new church building erected at a cost of R95 million for a congregation with 17 000 members (cf. Jackson 2006). It is surrounded by luxurious security villages, among them Woodhill Estate and Mooikloof.

We can speak in the abstract or we can ask very practically: how could true humanity best be expressed in that diversified microcosm? Because this narrative raises all the issues: the power of the market, land values of individual households, 170 000 families in Tshwane without access to formal housing, the influx of people across our borders, tension between church and prophetic theology, the distance between Christians in this church, the squatters on the land, and the property owners surrounding them – with only fences keeping them apart.

How do we foster communal solidarity in such a context, for well-heeled black and white people to see their black sisters and brothers as potential neighbours and not as threats? Is it possible to even imagine communal economics and integrated neighbourhoods working in this place? Or is that a pipedream?

A few thousand low-income black people already live in those neighbourhoods as domestic workers, gardeners and security guards, but mostly in backyards or servant's quarters. That seems to be acceptable, as long as they do not live in decent housing next door to me.

4.7 Theology and the church from below

Dwight Hopkins (1991:194) speaks of Biko as a theologian from and with the people, never bogged down by narrow or strict orthodoxies but involved "in theological issues pertaining to the very life and death of his community".

Some Christians refuse to get involved with the squatters on the land I just mentioned because they do not want to condone an illegal activity, which they consider squatting to be. Other Christians stand in solidarity with the squatters supporting them legally and otherwise. Communities such as Marabastad, Salvokop, Mamelodi Extension 6, Diepsloot and many others are caught up in perpetual life and death battles. Inner city buildings have become showcases of the quest for humanity and the death of dignity. The power of capital, globalisation, the market, foreign investment and so-called urban renewal all contribute to the life or death of urban communities in different ways.

"Confronted with the kingdom of evil, Biko discovered a fighting God in Jesus Christ whose mission sided with the daily tribulations of the black poor and the world's poor" (Hopkins 1991:198). In the contest for urban space and land I can imagine a fighting God who in Jesus Christ enters urban spaces that were exploited to claim them for the poor of the world. I can also imagine the sanitised church being at odds with the messiness of the church of the poor.

Biko (1986:30) once said: "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 noises from his counterpart." Today Biko might say, "If the wealthy God has been doing the talking all along, at some stage the poor God will have to raise his voice and make himself heard over and above noises from his counterpart." Which God's voice will be raised loudest - the God on the squatters' side of the fence, or the God on the side of the fence where the wealthy live and go to church?

In the context of this little narrative, once again we have to de-racialise God. Hopkins refers to Biko's understanding (1986:30; cf Hopkins 1991:196) that "black Christians could not wholeheartedly fight against the sins of the white church because they, in fact, had accepted and internalised white dogma". The 'yuppification' of some black churches is already evident in shifting agendas, new languages, deviations from communal solidarity similar to those in society at large.

Biko equated the church with other social institutions: segregated schools, universities, government and law (Wilson 1991:44). He expressed disillusionment with the church for not being an alternative community.

[T]o the revolutionary the Church is anti-progress and therefore anti-God's wishes because long ago it decided not to obey God but to obey man [sic]; long ago the church introduced segregated worship and segregated seminaries (Biko, in Wilson 1991:44).

Biko felt that Christ was "so conservatively interpreted at times that I find him foreign to me. On the other hand if I accept him and ascribe to him the characteristics that flow logically from my contemplation about him and his work, then I must reject the Church almost completely" (Biko, in Wilson 1991:44).

In how far is the present-day church nurturing an alternative consciousness? Or has the institutional church in its neutrality and silence already been absorbed beyond redemption by the dominant surrounding culture? To whom will the landless and homeless of our city look when they need the solidarity of God's people? Would the institutional church be by-passed by new expressions of community?

According to Hopkins (1991:200) Biko grounded Christianity and the quest for true humanity in "a visionary faith for the poor". It is always in solidarity with the poor and the Christ of the poor that we discover true faith and true humanity.

4.8 Employing cultural resources

Black consciousness realised the political importance of cultural expressions (Mzamane 1991:185) and regarded art forms like poetry, dance, theatre and music as vital resources for political education and conscientisation. This was partly because conventional political activity was largely banned. The theatre provided an alternative space (Mzamane 1991:186) that was, to quote Robert Kavanagh, "cheap, mobile, simple to present, and difficult to supervise, censor, or outlaw". It built on the indigenous traditions of story-telling, heroic poetry, dance and song in rituals and ceremonies.

The vitally important role played by poetry in precolonial African society is being re-enacted in the altogether different context of the African labour movement and political struggle of South Africa today (Mzamane 1991:189).

The Theatre Council of Natal, created by Saths Cooper, the Moodleys, and others, the poetry of Mongane Wally Serote and the literary works of Njabulo Ndebele (Wilson 1991:28) are examples of cultural expressions that helped foster a new black consciousness. Andre P Brink (Mzamane 1991:189) spoke about the role of black poetry as an "instrument of liberation" and "a means of confronting political power"

Black consciousness understood that culture could be either oppressive or liberating (Mzamane 1991:193). Culture has an important political and prophetic function in society, not only when oppression was overt pre-1994, but also in strengthening our democracy and the struggle against new forms of oppression today. Cultural spaces allow for broad-based participation by many different people in ways that could facilitate self-expression without excessive censoring.

5 "TAKING BACK OUR STREETS": CLAIMING OUR AGENCY THROUGH ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITIES

In claiming back our streets, our public spaces, our voice, our agency to shape history and the city we are in we need to be very practical:

- remain present where new forms of exclusion manifest themselves
- create spaces for self-expression
- stimulate people's definition of self and their awareness of systemic inhumanities
- help people recognise and foster own agency and assets, both in our faith communities and the communities we seek to serve
- work for interdependence and self-reliance
- look for radical expressions, signs of an alternative economics, where land can be developed in innovative and prophetic ways to bring together the different worlds of our city
- encourage cultural expression in our liturgies and create spaces for cultural expression in our neighbourhoods so people can articulate their hopes and struggles and break the silence

Movements for dignity and liberation should be about dismantling whatever is anti-human wherever it occurs (Alexander 1991:252). Whether social exclusion is experienced by the landless or homeless, by people lacking access to antiretroviral medication, by male and female prostitutes, by refugees and asylum-seekers, by low-income tenants threatened with displacement, we should nurture a vision of human dignity and our common humanity. We should do the same, moreover, among the rich and the powerful.

Whatever we do, Biko suggested two distinct stages in the work of cultivating an alternative consciousness, which is about the “awakening of the people” (cf Wilson 1991:76) to a preferred future and a common humanity. But what does that mean?

Biko (1978:29) suggests that it has to start internally before any changes can be made to the status quo. “The first step thereof is to make the black man come to himself; to put back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process” (cf also Halisi 1991:109-110).

Firstly, then, we should engage in awakening the people - people in the streets, people in their pews, well-off people from their own psychological oppression or numbness, recognising their inferiority complex or their ignorance.

Secondly, we must engage in an awakening from our physical oppression living in a society shaped by capital, markets, race, class, gender and/or global economic patterns (Wilson 1991:33; a SASO resolution quoted in Woods 1987:161); an oppression of barricaded communities and sprawling informal settlements coexisting side by side, and their mutual intolerance, their inability to break down the fences.

Biko spoke of history being examined from a white perspective, and suggested that “a people without a positive history are like a vehicle without an engine” (Sibisi 1991:134). Yet history is being written and rewritten every day in small and big ways in our city and its different neighbourhoods; and too often the unfolding stories are unrepresentative of the many untold stories that are alive on the street. We read about urban renewal but we’re not told how many poor people were dumped to renew the city. We read about investment but we’re not told how many poor people are beneficiaries or participants in the outcomes of such investment.

We need movements that will break the silence, calling forth the agency of all people to co-author a new and better story for our city. As we write our new story together sparks of true humanity might be discovered and celebrated. If we fail to do so, we might increasingly lose our streets and our humanity.

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