

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF RADICAL RESPONSIBILITY: BIKO AN AFRICAN BONHOEFFER

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1 INTRODUCTION: BIKO AN AFRICAN BONHOEFFER?

Black consciousness as personified by Biko represents a radical assumption of individual and collective responsibility. That is the thesis considered in this article. The premises of black consciousness were the total isolation of individuals and the oppressed in general, and not hoping for liberation to come via some outside agency, be it divine or human. As such it represents a motion of no confidence in the assumption that people actively care about their fellow humans (of a different skin colour). Biko was the eagle who kicked out his nestling so that it could learn to fly; he was Zarathustra's prophet who encouraged the student to surpass his master; he was a Bonhoeffer who told human beings to take responsibility for themselves without hoping for divine intervention. For all these reasons black consciousness may be regarded as a beacon of African renaissance, comparable to the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions.

Comparing Biko with a white European theologian is foreign to his thinking. After all, his whole point was that Africans should think for themselves and not forever copy non-African models that are held up as the ideal. Yet the resemblances between Biko and Bonhoeffer are so striking that the comparison comes to mind involuntarily. This in no way suggests that Biko took over any ideas from Bonhoeffer. Indeed, there is no evidence that he ever read Bonhoeffer's works. He was influenced by people like Frantz Fanon, Senghor, Diop, Aimé Césaire, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and the like. It would have been contrary to Biko's entire mindset to explicitly follow a Western thinker. But neither does it imply that he was too obtuse to learn from anybody. He learned a great deal from Western philosophers like Sartre, Bergson and others.

Naturally there are strident contrasts between Biko and Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer had far more time than Biko to put his ideas into writing. He had had the benefit of theological training, whereas Biko's student day involvement in SASO cut his academic studies short. Bonhoeffer, in his completely different context, addressed the *Bekennende Kirche*, whereas Biko's initial appeal was to black students. Whereas Bonhoeffer could fall back on established theological and philosophical precedents to substantiate his case, Biko based his argument on practical experience and his innate sense of justice. Bonhoeffer was speaking mainly to individuals. Biko's appeal was to the black population at large.

To return to the analogy: apartheid and Nazism¹ were surely two of the greatest crimes against humanity and in that history Biko and Bonhoeffer are two of the greatest names. Both ended their lives in jail because of their defiance of the oppressor. Both galvanised their societies into courageous resistance. Both were charismatic personalities. Bonhoeffer was executed one day before liberation and had the opportunity to emigrate. Biko was offered an opportunity to emigrate to the

¹ In this regard Woods (1987:48) says: "Not since Hitler's Nuremberg has any regime anywhere in the world inflicted so monstrous a burden of racial regulations on any community as the Afrikaner Nationalist minority government of South Africa has inflicted on the vast majority of its own citizens."

USA, in which case he would probably still have been alive.² Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) died at the age of 39, Biko (18 December 1946-12 September 1977) at 31. Both managed to make a passively submissive population aware of the possibility of freedom. Biko called a suffering black populace to demonstrate publicly rather than just bemoan their lot in secret. Bonhoeffer called on the many Germans who opposed Nazism not to wait on God but to liberate themselves. Both thinkers linked human thought to human activism. Both summoned people who had been cowed into submission to responsible resistance. In a situation of state terrorism both had the guts to rebel against the powers that be, knowing full well that it jeopardised their lives – which was proved only too true. Both martyrs' protest set an example to humanity for the rest of time.

2 IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH RESPONSIBILITY

Both Biko and Bonhoeffer raised popular awareness of the factors that shape people's identity. For anti-Nazi Germans it was as hard to rebel against the Nazi regime as it was for South African blacks to rise against apartheid. Biko and Bonhoeffer both pointed out, not merely that it was possible, but also that authentic identity is grounded in rebellion. The difference is that while the Germans feared the regime, South African blacks, besides fearing the government, also lacked confidence in themselves.

In this respect Biko had a far more formidable task. He had to overcome not only people's fear but also their self-mistrust. This was not just psychological make believe. He was convinced that African identity stood on solid ground; it had a rich cultural heritage to draw on: "... in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African" (Biko 2004:45).

Assuming responsibility in order to find identity probably has an individualistic bias, which undoubtedly characterises Bonhoeffer's appeal. Biko, by contrast, put the accent squarely on community identity, the hallmark of African culture. Not that Africans deny individual identity, but it is more closely linked to community identity than in European culture. In Africa pluriform individual identities are evoked by group identity.

3 BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AS WAY OF RETRIEVING OUR HUMANITY/IDENTITY

Although one could cite plenty of parallels elsewhere, black consciousness is probably a uniquely South African development, tied to the person of Steve Biko. Nowhere except in South Africa did the degradation of black people assume such a flagrant form. Black consciousness did not evolve in isolation, however, but should be viewed in conjunction with black power, black nationalism, black identity, racial nationalism and racial internationalism.

Biko's significance lay in his ability to articulate the general sense of disempowerment, his courage to rebel against it and his charismatic power to inspire others to reach for the same ideal. Stubbs (Biko 2004:218) writes as follows about him: "And then, finally, there was the new quality that life in his company took on. It was like the Kingdom. The impossible became possible." That was symbolised by the *idea* of black consciousness. Woods (1978:33) puts it thus: "The idea behind Black Consciousness was to break away almost entirely from past black attitudes to the liberation struggle and to set a new style of self-reliance and dignity for blacks as a psychological attitude leading to new initiatives." Pityana, known for his endorsement

² Biko was offered an opportunity early in 1977 to go to the USA under the auspices of the USA-SA Leadership Exchange Programme, but refused unless "America had given proof of a radically changed policy towards South Africa" (Stubbs, quoted by Wilson 1991:64; Maimela 2000:173).

of the maxim “Black man, you’re on your own”,³ expresses it as follows (quoted in Woods 1978:39):

This means that black people must build themselves into a position of nondependence upon whites. They must work towards a self-sufficient political, social and economic unit. In this manner they will help themselves towards a deeper realization of their potential and worth as self-respecting people.

Although black consciousness is ascribed to Biko, he was actually only the spokesman for numbers of his contemporaries who shared the same sentiments. In many respects, however, he led the way and one could concede Maimela’s (2000:346) point: “If Biko had not performed the role to which destiny so manifestly called him, it is conceivable that the course of history in South Africa might have run along very different lines.” What singles out Biko was his courage in fearlessly taking on the prevailing system. More than that, what makes him stand out was his invocation of certain values underlying the struggle – humanity, identity, self-respect, trust in oneself, responsibility, pathos, to name but a few. The question is, once the struggle is over, does that put paid to those values? Maybe it is simply human for values to feature prominently in a challenging situation that affects a particular group and that they should fade into the background when people revert to humdrum, unchallenging living.

The school for learning values is the battle of life. The existence of a Biko who embodies values for an individual or a group does not guarantee that every member of the group will espouse those values. Biko knew this only too well and strongly condemned those whom he saw as passive onlookers. The values he represented were shared by most of his contemporaries, since everyone suffered under a system that robbed them of their human dignity, identity and rights. One cannot expect those values to be upheld with the same fervour by a generation that grew up in the post-apartheid era. In this regard Gibson (2004:4) poses the critical question whether in South African politics today “‘faith’ in static forms such as The Party, The Struggle, The Nation, Law, Culture, and so on ... [does not take] the place of critical thought and ... [conceal] the true condition of men and women, suffocating what Biko called their ‘quest for a new humanity’.”

4 RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MODE OF A HERMENEUTICS OF THE SELF

Black consciousness as propounded by Biko and other leaders is more than just resistance to colonialism and apartheid. It is more than an ideology to mobilise Africans to rebel. It is rather a spontaneous expression of African humanism. Underlying black consciousness is African philosophy. Its aim was not to indoctrinate but to interpret by liberating interpretation. Liberation through understanding what is going on inside you precedes physical liberation. Assuming responsibility is impossible unless you interpret and understand your situation. You cannot pursue lofty aims without firm premises: “In our responsibility we attempt to answer the question: ‘What shall I do?’ by raising the prior question: ‘What is going on?’ or ‘What is being done to me?’ rather than ‘What is my end?’ or ‘What is my ultimate law?’” (Niebuhr 1963:63).

Hence spiritual (mental) emancipation comes before material emancipation. Maimela (2000:349) writes: “It was Biko’s insistence that human pride in *all aspects* of one’s self, one’s condition and one’s heritage is *logically prior* to any programme of

³ In this regard, see Mosibudi Mangena 1989, *On your own: evolution of Black Consciousness in South Africa/Azania*, Braamfontein: Skotaville.

physical emancipation or improvement in one's material situation." For Maimela (2000:350), black consciousness was based "more on spiritual than material motivation, with the movement promising the gratification of group solidarity fostering a positive self-image".

In this respect black consciousness differs from most other ideologies, which regard people purely as supporters of some cause, movement or struggle. Black consciousness does not subjugate human beings to an idea – it subjugates the idea to humans. It does not focus on people so as to use them to further somebody else's ideology; it is aimed at personal emancipation. To Biko black consciousness was not a methodology or a means to an end. Its ultimate aim was to produce "real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society" (Biko 2004:55). Stubbs rightly observes (in Biko 2004:205-6): "... perhaps the political genius of Steve lay in concentrating on the creation and diffusion of a new *consciousness* rather than in the formation of a rigid *organisation*." Black consciousness instils a critical attitude towards the world and the way it undermines personal identity, well-being and human dignity. Zithulele (2007:105) writes: "Our trial was a trial of ideas. It was about conscientising people about our philosophy, the philosophy of black people."

Black consciousness is a hermeneutics of the self. It expresses blacks' responsibility for their own situation. The word 'responsibility' is a latecomer in human history. Taking responsibility is a prerequisite for changing your lot. "The first element in the theory of responsibility is the idea of *response*" (Niebuhr 1963:61). Responsibility starts with self-understanding. It articulates the way in which we interpret our suffering, objectification, dehumanisation.

It seems to be the fate of the poor, the oppressed, the dependent to be objectified and depersonalised. The only way to rise above it is to respond by interpreting the process. Response is a function of interpretation. Niebuhr (1963:59) puts it thus:

Yet everyone with any experience of life is aware of the extent to which the characters of people he has known have been given their particular forms by the sufferings through which they have passed. But it is not simply what has happened to them that has defined them; their responses to what has happened to them have been of even greater importance, and these responses have been shaped by their interpretations of what they have suffered.

This notion is echoed by Mathatha (2007:97):

Steve said we were our own liberators and because we were the ones who felt the pain of oppression, we carried the sole responsibility to bring down the system that oppressed us.

Black consciousness is a hermeneutics of the self that made blacks aware of what was going on inside them by interpreting their suffering. Not that they did not know it – after all, the awareness was widespread. But it had to be spoken aloud and exposed for the caricature it was. That caricature was a product of the apartheid culture, in which blacks lost their human dignity and identity. Biko wanted to get people to critically interpret their response to their situation. Liberation cannot happen if you do not believe in the possibility of freedom, in yourself, and if that belief is not nourished by positive action. Biko embodied such belief.

Biko put it as follows in his response to the defence lawyer David Soggott during the 1976 black consciousness trial:

We try to get blacks to grapple realistically with their problems, to attempt to find solutions to their problems, to develop what one might call an awareness of their situation, to be able to analyse it and to provide

answers for themselves. The purpose is really to provide some kind of hope (Woods 1987:174).

If people have lost all hope, what is the point of assuming responsibility for their situation?

5 SOME ASPECTS OF BIKO'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE SELF

Biko's hermeneutics of the self is the way he perceived his situation and reacted to it responsibly. To him black consciousness entailed the following.

5.1 Facing up to loss of identity

The issue that black consciousness confronts cannot be divorced from the black identity crisis. It is a continental symptom of colonialism. Countries were occupied by people with a different skin colour, language, religion and arms and technology that evoked admiration, desire and fear. It was a foreign civilisation offering new experiences and promising luxuries, along with health, progress and prosperity. But participation in that culture was proscribed. The promised rewards came at a price: trading your labour, along with your cultural identity, language, customs, religion and traditions for the products of an alien culture. You become an immigrant in your own country. You no longer speak your own language, you copy the ways and customs of others in order to be accepted and find a job. You are placed in a situation where you constantly have to explain yourself and feel embarrassed about the behaviour of many of your fellow Africans. Your life begins to centre on something you have never been and can never become. It means living in a 'no man's land' with no identity. Your own identity is renounced, but acquiring a new identity turns out to be as impossible as changing the colour of your skin. Dependence on the impostor culture makes you a slave who is rewarded with crumbs from a table that belongs to you. Rebellion is unthinkable because of the impostor's military and technological superiority. It is unthinkable because of your sense of inferiority in the face of the new culture. The latter was to become Biko's focus.

Biko turned to African culture for retrieving black identity. Maimela (2000:202) affirms it: "... he was concerned to locate the significance of African identity in Africa itself." Hence part of his strategy was to promote African culture, languages and religions. Biko (2004:47) cites the following traits: the importance attached to human beings, the capacity to talk to each other, intimacy, house visiting. Africans are not suspicious but credit people with inherent goodness; they refrain from using others as stepping stones. They are prepared to slow down progress for the sake of harmony, evidenced by the pervasiveness of rhythm and music. He refers to Africans' attitude towards property as communally owned. The accent is on the human being rather than on power. Africans are profoundly religious, reverencing both God and ancestors (Biko 2004:49). Blacks' traditional identity was associated with community life, where they enjoyed dignity, respect, esteem. They lost all that because colonial history wrote black culture off as primitive and savage.

Black consciousness is intimately linked with the importance of dignity in African culture, a dignity arising from people's humanness and the respect to which individuals, simply and especially by virtue of being human, are entitled in the community. As Mbembe (2007:137) puts it, "it was, from the start, a philosophy of life and a philosophy of hope". Thus black consciousness was a metaphor for a new conception of life, in which every individual could share in order to retrieve their self-respect and dignity. Biko's special inspiration was the passionate conviction that a black man is as worthy as any other (Woods 1987:79). Woods (1987:59) writes: "Hence thinking along lines of Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being, entire in himself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine."

5.2 Understanding and criticism of black fears and passivity

Passivity is one of the response patterns of fear. Passivity can be a response, but in the apartheid context it was a non-response. Indeed, it was what the oppressors expected. Black passivity was not an outward response but an inward reaction in the form of self-contempt and self-mistrust. Biko wanted to change that.

Halisi (1991:100) assesses black consciousness philosophy in light of the fact “that resignation to racial domination was rooted in self-hatred and this had major implications: the black person’s low sense of self-esteem fostered political disunity, allowed ethnic leaders and other moderates to usurp the role of spokespersons for the black masses, and encouraged a dependence on white leadership. Conversely, a heightened sense of racial awareness would encourage greater solidarity and mobilise mass commitment to the process of liberation.”

Biko saw fear as a major factor in the paralysis of the African spirit. Apartheid politics was fear driven. Africans had every reason to fear the security forces: they were browbeaten, intimidated, detained under draconian laws (Biko 2004:80-87). Bonhoeffer (1978:54-55) for his part writes about the weakness of human nature that surfaces in stressful times:

In the face of totally unexpected threats and opportunities it is fear, desire, irresolution and brutality which reveal themselves as the motives for the actions of the overwhelming majority. At such a time as this it is easy for the tyrannical despiser of men to exploit the baseness of the human heart, nurturing it and calling it by other names. Fear he calls responsibility. Desire he calls keenness. Irresolution becomes solidarity. Brutality becomes masterfulness. Human weaknesses are played upon without unchaste seductiveness, so that meanness and baseness are reproduced and multiplied ever anew.

Bonhoeffer is clearly referring to Hitler when he says: “In the presence of the crowd he professes to be one of their number, and at the same time he sings his own praises with the most revolting vanity and scorns the rights of every individual. He thinks people stupid, and they become stupid. He thinks them weak, and they become weak. He thinks them criminal, and they become criminal.”

Applied to the apartheid situation, many fearful blacks displayed a similar ‘docility’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘virtue’. Biko homed in on the fear underlying these attitudes, condemning it and trying to mobilise them to emancipate themselves.⁴

5.3 Criticism of apartheid and racism

Biko was not a racist: he combated racism. He saw ‘race’ as a social construction rather than just a biological datum (Halisi 1991:105). This complements Foucault’s view that our perception of, for instance, sexuality and madness are largely social constructions.⁵

Black consciousness as embodied by Biko is radical humanism. Bernard Zylstra of the Canadian Institute for Christian Studies had a conversation with Biko in July 1977, recorded in Woods (1987:115-126), in which Biko explained black consciousness. Biko (Woods 1987:116) said: “The recognition of the death of white invincibility forces blacks to ask the question: ‘Who am I?’ ‘Who are we?’ And the

⁴ Biko was opposed to fear in the form of collaboration with the apartheid regime. Thus he condemned black policemen who were subservient to the system (Biko 2004: 86) and criticised the Bantustans (Biko 2004:152-153, 166).

⁵ In this regard Appiah (1998:41) writes: “What exists ‘out there’ in the world - communities of meaning, shading variously into each other in the rich structure of the social world - is the province not of biology but of hermeneutic understanding.”

fundamental answer we give is this: 'People are people!' So 'Black' Consciousness says: 'Forget about the color!'"

In this context Gibson (2002:243) cites Fanon, who "believed that getting beyond the vicious circle of dependency and inferiority was connected to a new humanism rather than narrowly racial national consciousness. At the same time this new humanism is a result of the dialectic of black consciousness; of an equality of cultures." Cultures should coexist in mutual respect and appreciation. In that framework minorities (minority cultures) cannot dictate, because the concept is racially linked. The same may be said of ethnocentrism.⁶ Biko (2004:170) comments as follows on minorities: "We see a completely non-racial society. We don't believe, for instance, in the so-called guarantees for minority rights, because guaranteeing minority rights implies recognition of portions of the community on a race basis. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority, there shall be no majority, just the people."

In the 1976 trial he told the defence lawyer Soggott: "... it is not our intention to generate a feeling of anti-whiteism. We are merely forced by historic considerations to recognize the fact that we cannot plan side by side with white people who participate in their exclusive pool of privileges" (Wood 1987:178).

The inexplicable thing about racism is that it has no eye for the individual. The individual is seen in terms of a group, which is unacceptable. It is the antipode of humanness. Bloke Modisane (1986:242) expresses it forcefully: "The white man has laboured earnestly, sincerely and constantly to deface the blacks, with the result that the black man has ceased to be an individual, but a representative of a despised race; they hate me, not as an individual, but as a collective symbol ..." One consequence is that it simply leads to inverted racism. Modise (1986:243) says: "And because man learns by imitation the system of depersonalisation has transported over to the Africans; they have been trained and conditioned to see the whites as 'baas' and 'missis', and in their collectivist reaction every white is the signal of authority, a symbol to be hated and feared. There are no individuals among whites, and by their actions the Africans do not regard them as people."

What Biko had in mind was not a unilateral relationship on the part of whites, but certainly not on the part of blacks either. The relationship between self and other had to be a healthy dialectics, but first the whites had to listen: "... but inevitably the process drives towards what we believe history also drives to, an attainment of a situation where whites first have to listen" (Biko 2004:151). African humanism in fact respects the self-other relationship in a healthy dialectics. It allows scope for hierarchy and respect, but not for the apartheid mentality of master and slave.⁷

A great deal has been written about the Hegelian example of the master-slave dialectics. In that dialectics neither master nor slave can have a self-other relationship. The other cannot be *other*, a *Gegenuber*, so there is no possibility of human interaction. Both master and slave lose their humanity. The slave can show no recognition. The master objectifies the slave and the slave, having been objectified, responds by not recognising the master. Without that recognition the master is nothing, and so is the slave. Niebuhr (1963:72-73), with reference to Buber, describes the result of objectification thus: "... the I in I-It relations is not a reflexive being. It does not know itself as known; it only knows ... It values but does not value itself or its evaluations." A unilateral relationship is no relationship at all.

5.4 Criticism of liberal meddling in black liberation

⁶ For black consciousness as a counter-ethnicity movement, see Halisi 1991:103.

⁷ With reference to the 'two ways of being' (the fact that blacks have one way of being in relation to whites and another among themselves) Gibson (2002:237) observes: "Among whites, the black experiences no intersubjectivity, no reciprocity. The black is simply an object among objects."

This is a surprising aspect of black consciousness, which aroused liberal indignation. But the principle underlying it is in fact the very self-responsibility that is the hallmark of Biko's hermeneutics of the self. Again there are striking parallels with Bonhoeffer's thinking. Bonhoeffer (1978:217) writes:

The responsible man acts in the freedom of his own self, without the support of men, circumstances or principles, but with a due consideration for the given human and general condition and for the relevant questions of principle. The proof of his freedom is the fact that nothing can answer for him, nothing can exonerate him, except his own deed and his own self.

Biko stands white support of the struggle on its head by showing that white liberals themselves need to be liberated. And just as they cannot help him, he cannot help them. They must live up to their own responsibility: "The liberal must fight on his own and for himself. If they are true liberals they must realise that they themselves are oppressed, and that they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification" (Biko 2004:72).

Biko's radical rejection of liberal white support must be seen as a strategy of the liberation process rather than as inverted racism or personal aversion to whites.⁸ Like any help, it is ultimately a matter of helping the other to help herself. For blacks to help themselves they had to sever the link with white 'liberators'. Apartheid had reduced blacks to a state of helplessness and created bonds of dependence, which had to be broken. It called for revolution: structures that kept blacks in a state of grownup children had to be demolished. Means of production, education and training, employment, the franchise, basic rights and the like must be the rightful claim of everybody who is expected to be a responsible citizen. For that black consciousness was prepared to do battle.

White liberals obstructed the growth of black consciousness. Thus Biko (quoted in Woods 1978:63) said: "... but to equip ourselves to challenge the enemy we first have to distance ourselves from the friend who inhibits us."⁹ The liberal is no enemy, he's a friend – but for the moment he holds us back, offering a formula too gentle, too inadequate for our struggle." His stance on this issue is an example of his endeavour to get black leaders to assume responsibility for their situation themselves without 'cheap' help from liberal sympathisers. "The age of the Liberal was such that the black voice was not very much heard in echoing what was said by Liberals" (Biko to Soggot, Biko 2004:150). Hence one of Biko's first moves was to secede from NUSAS and found SASO. Woods (1978:34) writes: "It was the height of irony that the first major manifestation of Black Consciousness sprang from a black breach with one of the most courageously pro-black white youth organizations, the National Union of South Africa Students."

We have said that black consciousness is neither racism nor inverted apartheid. At face value that was how it struck white liberals. After all, they were not invited to join in the process. That was not because they were white, but because whites symbolised the crutch on which blacks depended to understand themselves and their situation and to try and change it. The white crutch implied that blacks were

⁸ As a movement black consciousness would probably have got nowhere without aid from the University Christian Movement (UCM), the Christian Institute and the liberal white press (Maimela 2000:185). Its self-help projects were largely funded by the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF), under the supervision of Nengwekhulu (Maimela 2000:216, 218).

⁹ One could argue that Biko was not opposed to white liberals as persons, but to the fact that their 'zeal' from their white perspective was an obstacle to black initiative. Biko was a people person and highly critical of Westerners' personal analyses: "When you guys talk about a person, you tear him apart, analyse the way he speaks, looks at someone, thinks: you find a motive for everything he does; you categorise him politically, socially, etc. In short you are not satisfied until you have really torn him apart and have really parcelled off each and every aspect of his general behaviour and labelled it" (Biko 2004:197, paraphrased by Stubbs).

incapable of interpreting and changing their own circumstances. The black consciousness approach cost them dearly, because material and financial means for a liberation programme were limited and they had to forego 'white' support.

5.5 Credibility of black intellectuals

Biko was known to be a black intellectual, who envisaged a major role for intellectuals in mobilising the masses. Halisi (1991:109) mentions that Biko believed that mass education could be accomplished by committed intellectuals armed with knowledge of popular culture. Popular culture could be used to "breathe life back into the oppressed". To what extent are social interpretation, social criticism and social initiatives still confined to African intellectuals? Biko, an intellectual, was guided by other black intellectuals. He encouraged dialogue between intellectuals, both locals and those in diaspora (Halisi 1991:107).

The crucial question is: what is the eventual role of black intellectuals to be? Is it an interim or a permanent role? Does the African intellectual not fulfil the same function as white liberals once did – to think on the masses' behalf, dictate to them and decide for them? Black intellectuals (and it is not clear exactly whom that includes) have no mandate to decide on the masses' behalf. Biko would have viewed them in a ministering rather than an elitist role.¹⁰ In practice it would seem that nowadays decisions are not taken by black intellectuals but by the ANC at its congresses (with its intellectual top brass), which confirms the impression of centralism.¹¹ The question (which arises in any democracy) is, how representative are decisions in fact? To what extent do they accommodate diversity and diverse viewpoints? To what extent do they empower people to take responsibility for themselves?

The task of taking responsibility for yourself can be highlighted by intellectuals but should not be left to them. Unfortunately there is an entrenched notion that intellectuals are confined to academics, which is a fallacy. The few individuals who were literate and wrote often sacrificed, because of a lack time, a lot of social exposure and grassroots intellectuals could not convey their ideas on paper. Besides, black intellectuals tended to have little contact with people at the grassroots. Ramphela (1991:163) writes: "... greater value is placed by blacks on social interaction and the serving of social networks of support. Black intellectuals are often caught between competing demands of social availability and academic life."

Biko wanted to get the masses to rediscover their identity and assume individual and group responsibility. Nobody can liberate a country without taking the populace along on the road to liberation. "Liberation is an ongoing project. No plan, no leaders, no temporary strategic necessity can take its place: 'If we stagnate it is [the people's] responsibility, and if we go forward it is due to them too'" (Gibson 2003:197, quoting Fanon).

5.6 Criticism of religion that keeps people passive and submissive

The importance Africans attach to religion is indisputable. That is why the colonial strategy of using the gospel as a means of taking over the continent was so effective. Religion was to provide a transcendental basis for oppressing Africa. To the white South African government their statutorily entrenched values were synonymous with biblical guidelines. God had laid down the time and place (subordination) of nations.

¹⁰ Fortunately the proposed 'native club', which in fact had elitist and racially based undertones, never got off the ground. Jansen (2007:130) says in this regard: "The challenge ... is not to regress into some obscure nativism or race essentialism, as the morally obtuse project of the Native Club tried so clumsily to enforce."

¹¹ The following is an example of centralism in the ANC. In his contribution to the memorial volume for Biko, *We write what we like*, Thabo Mbeki allows little scope for black consciousness as a movement that still has any influence. He adds that if they think they can still operate in opposition to the ANC, they certainly have no future. Is this not a fresh instance of disregard of the other, albeit at organisational level? The ANC has such overwhelming support at present that Mbeki's comment may be seen as threatened overreaction.

The whites' ethos was God's ethos and Africans would err if they failed to heed it. Arguments that apartheid policy was diametrically opposed to a Jesus ethos of an option for the poor, the sick and the marginalised, that a Christian's freedom was non-negotiable, that people's persons should be respected and the like were dismissed as humanist philanthropy. The gospel that was brought to Africans so devoutly was to be the principal tool for breaking their spirit. Africans were emasculated with the sword of the gospel. In Biko's view most (black and white) South Africans' Christianity was purely formal. Christianity was linked to colonialism. "This means the Christians came here with a form of culture which they called Christian but which in effect was Western, and which expressed itself as an imperial culture as far as Africa was concerned" (Woods 1987:117). Biko had the courage to point out that this god, like the emperor, wore no clothes.

Biko devoted a surprising amount of attention to religion and churches. This reflects his keen sensitivity to one of the root causes of discrimination. After all, the apartheid regime sought to ground itself in biblical principles. Hence he saw Christianity as "the ideal religion for the maintenance of the subjugation of the same (black) people" (2004:61).

Biko considered religion to be "a social institution attempting to explain what cannot be scientifically known about the origin and destiny of man". His critique is directed mainly to the Christian church, which showed little understanding of blacks' situation and saw them purely as objects of mission. "Stern faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their thieving, house-breaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery etc. No one ever attempts to relate all of these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of schooling and migratory labour" (Biko 2004:61).

He criticised the church for its bureaucracy and division into innumerable denominations (Biko 2004:61). Biko sent his ideas on religion to Fr David Russell in a memorandum in 1974. We reproduce excerpts (edited by Stubbs, in Biko 2004:236-241). Biko accepts the human need for religion: "I am sufficiently religious to believe that man's internal insecurity can only be alleviated by an almost enigmatic and supernatural force to which we ascribe all power, all wisdom and love. This is ultimately what makes us tick ... I go further therefore to believe that God has laid down for man basic laws that must govern interaction between man and man, man and creature, man and nature at large" (p 236); "Most of the time one is born into or within a particular religion and denomination and very little individual thinking is done to consider the fundamental relationship between man and God. These laws I see as inscribed in the ultimate conscience of each living mortal" (p 237-238); "My attitude to the Church - i.e. organised denominational worship - is therefore completely down to earth. I see them more as social man-made institutions without any divine authority" (p 238); the church's conservative interpretation of the Bible makes Christ seem like a stranger (p 239); "To 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; long ago the Church itself decided to accept the motto 'white is value' etc." (p 241).

Biko (2004:63) isolates four criticisms of the Christian church:

1. It makes Christianity too much of a 'turn the other cheek' religion whilst addressing destitute people.
2. It is stunted by bureaucracy and institutionalisation.
3. It manifests in its structures a tacit acceptance of the system (i.e. 'white equals value').
4. It is limited by over-specialisation.

The correspondence with Bonhoeffer's viewpoint is manifest. Biko had the same objection as Bonhoeffer to passing all responsibility to God. He refers to the prayer "Thy will be done", commenting: "Indeed His will shall be done but it shall not appeal equally to all mortals for indeed we have different versions of His will. If the white God

has been talking all along, at some stage the black God will have to raise His voice and make Himself heard above noises from His counterpart” (Biko 2004:33).

Bonhoeffer was critical of contemporary psychoanalysis and existentialism as keys to authentic identity. Identity is born of assuming responsibility for the present situation. He was also critical of resorting to the church and dogma as surrogate protagonists to free people. Biko was critical of Christianity as a vicarious solace for human suffering. Hence he sided with liberation theologians and contributed greatly to the growth of Black Theology in South Africa. In his own words: “Deprived of spiritual content, the black people read the Bible with a gullibility that is shocking ... Obviously the only path open for us now is to redefine the message in the Bible and to make it relevant to the struggling masses” (Biko 2004:34).

Whereas Luther restored the Bible to the people by having it translated from Latin into the vernacular, theologians expropriated it anew with ivory tower theology and the idea of, “Read if you like, it does not say what it says”, to keep churchgoers dependent on the church’s hermeneutic hegemony. Biko (see 2004:62) rebelled against this.

In insisting on religions’ this-worldliness, Bonhoeffer proposed responsible, autonomous grappling with life’s problems as if God does not exist. This presupposes a sphere of human interaction based on Christian altruistic values like selfless love and sacrifice. Bonhoeffer (1971:360) comments: “God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy of religion [Feuerbach! – CWdT]. For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated.” Religious meaning is to be sought within rather than above us.

6 HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

Biko was a prophet who, in an age that was ripe for his message, could reflect the people’s general feeling, could use the emotion aroused by oppression to inspire them to change things. In that sense Biko’s era cannot be repeated and in the new South Africa black consciousness may not have the same power. Thus it may not necessarily be the best symbol to inspire people to take responsibility for themselves in a situation of reconstruction and development. The ideals of black consciousness are to a large extent encapsulated in the South African constitution and bill of rights. But the constitution does not have the same impact that Biko, for one, had. Stubbs (Biko 2004:205) sums it up:

Despite the rigour there was no fanaticism ... Herein lay the weakness of the movement: it was too much the movement of an idea, too little a ruthless organised force. Its weakness, yes; but also its ultimate strength! Being the movement of an idea, almost a mood, it was, and is, extraordinarily infectious. Individuals could be banned, detained, banished; wherever they continued, almost by the quality of their breathing, to spread this new mood of inner freedom, this refusal any more to acknowledge the rule of a minority group, the tyranny of a tragically lost, calvinist [sic] tribe.

Many would judge – as Mbeki does – that black consciousness is no longer a real force in South Africa. That is an auspicious sign, for it proves that black consciousness has served its purpose. A new generation of black South Africans born since 1994 can proudly identify with any number of worthwhile role models. If Biko had been alive today, he could look back with satisfaction on the achievement of many of his ideals. But that is only half the story. The struggle is not over, it has merely shifted. If we take the principles of black consciousness seriously, no affluent black African can dissociate herself from the lot of blacks living in poverty. Besides, South African blacks cannot dissociate themselves from the lot of Africans beyond

the Limpopo. Black consciousness was never meant to issue in inverted apartheid. Sadly, in the Hegelian dialectic the slave can assume the role of the master. Ramsamy (2002:210) says in this regard: "However, as the euphoria of liberation dies, the bitter lesson of the decolonization process is that national elites employ the same divisive techniques used by former colonial rulers to guarantee their privileges and maintain their power base."

7 NEED FOR A HERMENEUTICS OF POVERTY

Rooting out apartheid is one thing, but getting rid of poverty altogether is quite another. Here poverty should be understood in a broad sense. Radical poverty – at any rate in the African context – is closely linked to illiteracy, disease (e.g. aids), crime, corruption, alcoholism, loss of identity, subservience, dependence and lack of self-responsibility. Whereas formerly poverty and wealth related to skin colour, that link is no longer axiomatic. People earning a liveable wage soon forget what it means to have no secure income, to lack basic means of subsistence, a roof over their heads and the wherewithal to support a family. Most of the elements of black consciousness that Biko identified under apartheid apply to the struggle against poverty. The difference is that, whereas black consciousness had an identifiable enemy (apartheid, white oppression), the struggle against poverty has none. Who is to blame? The market economy, lack of skills and training, the state? Because it is difficult to personalise the enemy, it is difficult to mobilise people to combat an anonymous power.

Increasing urbanisation is leading to the breakdown of African communities' traditional bulwarks against poverty such as ubuntu, the extended family, the stokvel system, the church and religion. The disappearance of the fellowship typical of African humanism will be a great loss. Biko (2004:48) rated it highly, as is evident in the following:

It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbour for help if one was struggling. In almost all instances there was help between individuals, tribe and tribe, chief and chief etc. even in spite of war.

The chances are that middle-class, affluent blacks will in due course display exactly the same symptoms as affluent people worldwide: lots of sympathy, occasional handouts and for the rest responsibility is delegated to the state and market forces, over which there appears to be no control.

This is not the place to deal with the issue of poverty. The aim is simply to show that under apartheid the struggle against poverty and black consciousness were one and the same and that we need to look for values to deal with poverty. For that reason the principles of black consciousness can help extricate people from the web of disempowerment. Biko did not flinch from assuming responsibility and underscored the importance of discipline. More importantly, he appreciated the conditions under which responsibility and discipline applied. In his evidence at the 1976 black consciousness trial judge Boshoff asked him about a connection between crime and lack of influx control. He responded that there may be a connection, "but there is a much more fundamental reason. It is the absence of abundant life for the people who live there. With an abundance of life you get discipline, people get the things that they want. And because, of course, you do not get a society here which offers this to the people, the State introduces measures like influx control" (Woods 1987:170). The South African government could not provide the population with work, training and basic amenities, whereupon it attributed the inevitable crime rate to an inferior black culture.

To be realised black consciousness requires that all blacks on the continent must believe in themselves sufficiently to live up to Biko's notion of self-responsibility so as to truly change their lot. Africa has the physical and spiritual resources to do so.

Physically it still has vast mineral riches, and spiritually and culturally, albeit in various ways, it has resources which, Biko recognised, can help it reach that goal. Biko (2004: 32) writes: "The oneness of community for instance is at the heart of our culture. The easiness with which Africans communicate with each other is not forced by authority but is inherent in the makeup of African people ..." There are hopeful signs, like the African Renaissance, Nepad, the African parliament, the new African Union, et cetera. But they are nowhere near enough to bring about the revolution that African liberation requires. More than ever before, we need to heed Biko's cry that Africans must believe in themselves. The struggle today is more complex than the struggle of black consciousness against the apartheid regime. How does a rural black person combat globalisation, regionalism, lack of investment and the international community's relative aloofness from Africa (global apartheid)?

8 CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

If black consciousness is a radical hermeneutics of the self which summons people to assume responsibility by responding interpretively to their situation, then it is not restricted to an epoch of oppression but should feature all the more prominently in an age of freedom. Freedom, no less than oppression, calls for interpretation. How does my freedom determine my mind, how do I interpret it and where does that interpretation take me? If awareness of oppression unleashes energy, awareness of freedom should generate even more energy. To my mind the future of black consciousness lies in radical interpretation of our awareness of freedom. It needs a hermeneutics of freedom. As in the case of oppression, interpretation of freedom and appropriation of the idea precedes physical freedom. What is the dialectics between the two kinds of awareness? Freedom features against a historical background of bondage, but it should not be governed by that. We all know the adage that Africa cannot for ever blame colonialism and apartheid for everything that still goes wrong. True freedom is a gift only if it translates into the realisation of possibilities than an open future offers. Freedom to which we fail to respond leaves us more wretched than oppression to which we do not respond, since unrealised freedom has no alibi. In this context the response to freedom is not to pursue personal gain but to realise the potential of all human beings.

Bonhoeffer (1978:201, 218) linked responsibility to freedom and obedience. He writes (1978:220-221):

Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will. Obedience restrains freedom; and freedom ennobles obedience ... Obedience knows what is good and does it, and freedom dares to act, and abandons to God the judgement of good and evil. Obedience follows blindly and freedom has open eyes. Obedience has its hands tied and freedom is creative.

Without this guideline no freedom can be legitimate.

The following quotation from Mafuna (2007:87) is appropriate: "So, the black-white problem does not want to leave us. This is complicated by the 'nouveaux riches', who are determined to climb on the shoulders of their fellow blacks. Now it is becoming a class struggle! The workers are forgotten in the scramble by the comrades. Something is needed to curb the mad drive towards success at any cost. Could Black Consciousness be the antidote? I doubt it. We need a deeper remedy than that; not palliatives. Africa (and the world) need a spiritual revolution: in politics, economics, culture, and social relations." On similar lines Mbembe (2007:140) asks: "Is Black Consciousness the same as 'black economic empowerment' or is the ideology of 'black economic empowerment' the new way in which the 'black elite'

advances its narrow interests and legitimates its hegemony over the black working class and the black poor?"¹² Abuse of freedom and responsibility is part of the human condition and is not linked to race. The connection between personal conduct and race must be severed. Individuals are criminal, corrupt, greedy, irresponsible, lazy and the like for personal reasons, not because of their race.

The circumstances that gave rise to black consciousness in South Africa will hopefully never be repeated. Overcoming racist perceptions and attitudes is another matter. In both instances racism migrated 'inwards'. People still think on racial lines but no longer say so out loud. We still have a long way to go! Crime, corruption, poor governance, affirmative action, black empowerment, lack of responsibility and the like still have racial connotations. Janson (2007:131) writes: "Black Consciousness is relevant as long as white consciousness exists." Post-apartheid white consciousness is obviously not the same as in Biko's day. Thanks to stringent action, government and the constitution have managed to curb exploitation of blacks, although much remains to be done.

The time for black consciousness may be over, but the challenge remains. Under apartheid the premise of black consciousness was to reject whites because of their ideology of dominance. Today the cause of black empowerment cannot be realised by rejection but by creating new partnerships. The accent on black consciousness does not mean that Africa can or should operate in isolation. The partnerships will in the first place be intra-African, but must also be extended internationally. That, after all, is what Nepad stands for: new partnerships in African development. Yet we know, considering the human condition, that all partnerships are accompanied by self-enrichment and self-advancement. In its way the apartheid era can also be seen as a partnership, one in which one partner walked off with the lion's share of the privileges. The same may easily happen with economic globalisation, with Africa again coming off second best. Here Biko's prophetic words have to be spoken to a global audience. Their purport is that there can be no future on this planet if we lose our humanity. In Biko's view the West had already done so. He writes (Biko 2004:51): "As Kaunda puts it, our people may be unlettered and their physical horizons may be limited yet 'they inhabit a larger world than the sophisticated Westerner who has magnified his physical senses through inverted [sic – invented?] gadgets at a price all too often of cutting out a dimension of the spiritual'." On the same lines Biko reasoned that in the long run Africa's special contribution in the world lay in the field of human relationships: "... the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face" (Biko 2004:51).

For that reason our age desperately needs new Bikos – but Bikos with economic expertise and political astuteness, who are not scared to tackle the invisible, anonymous dragon of unjust economic structures. By way of conclusion Mandela's words (quoted by Mbeki 2007:39) are apposite:

While Steve Biko espoused, inspired, and promoted black pride, he never made blackness a fetish. At the end of the day, as he himself pointed out, accepting one's blackness is a critical starting point: an important foundation for engaging in struggle. Today, it must be a foundation for reconstruction and development, for a common human effort to end war, poverty, ignorance, and disease.

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¹² The following data from South African Income Online (2007:57) serve as an example. For the high income bracket the situation has improved for African households, Africans receiving 13% of high income in 1998, the proportion rising to 35.7% in 2004. White households now receive a greater proportion of low incomes, this rising from 3.4 % in 1998 to 5.1% in 2004, pointing to increased poverty in this population group. Whites also earned a smaller portion of high incomes, their share of high incomes dropping from 76.7% in 1998 to 52% in 2004. Despite 5% of all African households being classified as high income, they receive 35.7% of the income in the high income group.

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