

Maimela on Black Power in Black Theology (1987): A dialogue with Steve Biko

Moroka Mogashoa

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

Black¹ Power is the heart of Black Theology, while Black Consciousness is the soul of Black Theology. Until Blacks attain Black Power, they cannot speak without a flight (running away) from their White² oppressors. A Black person's attainment of Black Power is a conversion moment – a new birth. South African Black Theology and Black Consciousness predate the 1960s. The 1960s were merely the conceptualisation of what was already there. The Black's self-inflicted fear is the anti-thesis of Black Power. Through Black Consciousness theory Biko conceptualised and systematised Black Power. Maimela harnessed Biko's thoughts to systematise Black Theology. Black Power, Black Consciousness and Black Theology cannot do without one another. To speak of Black Theology without Black Power is tantamount to speaking of a Black person who is not Black.

Introduction

Black Power – a critical aspect of Black Theology – cannot be ignored in any discourse on Black Theology. South African Black Theology speaks to the concerns and the daily realities of the Black people who are oppressed by the White oppressive structures. In the 1980s Maimela became a formidable voice advocating the importance of Black Theology (under the apartheid regime) and its greater importance even after freedom and reconciliation in South Africa. Black Theology is a theology whose presence is a necessary conscience and a “liberation theology par excellence”. As an advocate for Black Theology, Maimela borrows from the theory and analysis presented by Biko in his writing about Black Power and Black Consciousness. Maimela re-appropriates Biko into theology and develops the argument of Black Power further. Maimela's specific work that this article reflects was in the mid-1980s, an era worth knowing for its sociopolitical features. This article therefore covers those arguments of Biko's which Maimela borrowed from, considers the mid-1980s sociopolitical context which was the time of Maimela's work, and concludes with a study of Maimela's analysis of Black Power in Black Theology – a power that I argue **is** and **ought to** remain real and concrete. Black Power is an element that ensures that Black Theology must speak to the real and concrete life experiences of the Black people, which need to change for the better: from oppression to liberation.

Biko on Black Power: a background

As far back as 1971, Steve Bantu Biko wrote a paper defining Black Power. He wrote this paper in order to revive and remind the Black people of the power they have over and against the fear that the Whites instilled – a fear which the Blacks internalised and lived by. Like a number of papers he wrote during his lifetime, the paper “Fear – an Important Determinant in South African Politics” was widely circulated through the South African Students' Organization (SASO). Biko's paper laid the ground for the theory and understanding of Black Power in South Africa. His work provided critical material that Maimela was to harness years later in succinctly and unapologetically arguing for Black Power as central to Black Theology in South Africa. Before we can delve into Maimela's arguments, let us revisit Biko's arguments on Black Power.

Creating absolute fear: White monopoly and harassment of Blacks – through intimidation (the master plan)

¹ The use of the capital “B” for the words “Black” or “Blackness” is a signifier of the person and the personhood of the Black people.

² The use of the capital “W” for the words “White” or “Whiteness” is a signifier of the person and the personhood of the White people.

White monopoly is about comfort and security. In order to maintain their privilege and position in South Africa, Whites had to use violence and fear. These are used because the minority White group dispossessed the Blacks, the majority group, of their land and freedom. In order to keep what they had not rightfully acquired, and because they were fearful of the Blacks, who ought to get back what is rightfully theirs, they had to use fear and violence. Whites instilled fear into the Blacks because these very same Whites were fearful of the Blacks.

To justify the use of their supreme masters' position, they created a huge security force to suppress any form of resistance displayed by the Blacks. According to Biko, in order for this force to justify its employment, any form of resistance whether real or perceived had to be broken down.³ In so doing, related security structures such as the court system with its Terrorism Act had to be utilised in order for them too to justify their existence.⁴ To the Whites, this cycle of fear and violence is logical – because it assures them the right to be supreme masters. This “logic”, Biko concludes, is a strange word to these people.⁵

With all the necessary resources and wealth of the country amassed by the Whites, the Blacks are left to struggle for survival. Life in the township, according to Biko, is such that it is a “miracle” for anyone to live to adulthood.⁶ The deprivation in the township is that of “absolute want”. This deprivation causes the Black person to kill in order to survive. Vandalism, murder, rape and plunder are the “order” of the day.⁷ All these take place as the real sources of the evil – White society – relax, while Blacks kill one another. If the Blacks try to speak out against this condition of absolute want, the White masters will, through the security force, introduce banning orders and house arrests.⁸ Harassment is the approach and the mentality of the moment. The tactics of the supreme masters will be so wide-ranging that Blacks will never be sure whether or not they are breaking the law. In other words, the very existence of the Black people is by its very nature a breaking of the law. Therefore the master plan to thoroughly intimidate the Blacks.

Black fear:⁹ the erosion of the soul of Black people (maximising the master plan)

So real is the White fear of the Blacks that the master plan has to be thoroughly maximised. That is, if the Whites cannot get respect, they will enforce fear. Such immorality is the “aura of the day”.¹⁰ This is the naked cruelty committed by the Whites. To sustain the fear, the system, through a myriad of mainly White civil agents, further instil this fear, causing Black people no longer to behave like human beings. This fear causes Blacks to fail to put up any resistance against their overall oppression. Individually, too, they cannot insist on the observance of their “manhood”.¹¹ Biko argues that this is a dangerous type of fear as it goes more than skin deep with an immeasurable rage that threatens to erupt.

As a result of the naked cruelty committed by the Whites, the Blacks see the Whites as their obstacle in their progress towards peace, prosperity and a sane society. Blacks see that Whiteness warrant being despised, hated, destroyed and replaced by a more human aspiration. Whiteness is therefore soiled beyond recognition. Whites, as a result, are not desirable and not to be emulated. There is only one thing that the Blacks envy in the Whites: the comfort that the Whites have. However, Biko is quick to re-appropriate the meaning of this comfort. He argues that before the Blacks can claim this comfort, their innermost, first wish is to kick the Whites.

Mutually beneficial reciprocal fear: the White government “versus” all whites

Biko does acknowledge that it is the White government that does these bad acts. He states as well that there are also Whites who disclaim responsibility for the country's inhumanity towards the Blacks. Biko credits these Whites with “logic”,¹² but for only four and a half years since at election time this logic is gone. So too, Biko states, are the English-speaking Whites, who vote for the National Party at election time. All Whites collectively recognise in it a strong bastion against the highly played-up

³ Biko, S. 1977. *I write what I like*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, p. 81.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ It is critical that at this stage I introduce the interesting analysis that Cleage presents in his book *The Black Messiah*. For Cleage, we all have fear. What determines our naming of fear is whether we are in a state of “fight or flight”. The body is ready for either one. Fear is determined by what we do. See Cleage, A. B. 1995: *The Black Messiah*. New Jersey: Africa World Press, p. 15.

¹⁰ Biko, S. 1977. *I write what I like*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, p. 83.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² This is not the same logic that the Whites accrued to themselves (see discussion above).

swart gevaar.¹³ The reciprocity of the fear is that the White government, on behalf of all Whites who are fearful of Blacks, perpetually harasses and instils fear among the Blacks, to the benefit of all Whites, so that during election time all Whites express appreciation for their White government by voting to keep it in power.

The second group of Whites who have “logic” (for four and a half years), according to Biko, are those who recognise and accept reasons for the Black person’s anger because of what they, the White people, have done to the Black people. The Whites are insecure, but their greed for power and wealth causes them to react with rage rather than display “open-mindedness and fair play”.¹⁴ Biko refers to this as the “interaction between fear and reaction” which starts a vicious cycle that multiplies both the fear and reaction. I refer to this interaction or vicious cycle as a “mutually beneficial reciprocal fear”. Clearly the Whites, be they part of the oppressive government or not, are collectively a White group and they act as such to protect each other’s interests. Maimela referred to this when he addressed the question “Do Whites have an authentic right to theologise on and about Black Theology?”¹⁵ Biko argued:

This is what makes meaningful coalitions between the Black and the White totally impossible ... the very fact that those disgruntled Whites remain to enjoy the fruits of the system would alone be enough to condemn them at Nuremburg ... Thus if Whites in general do not like what is happening to the Black people, they have the power in them to stop it here and now. We, on the other hand, have every reason to bundle them together and blame them jointly.¹⁶

For Biko, there is no gradual progression towards the emancipation of the Blacks. The emancipation of the Blacks ought to be immediate.

Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars with two-faced behaviour

Biko distinguishes between the Blacks whose souls are eroded by fear¹⁷ and the Blacks who have sold their souls to the Whites. In his discussion, Biko compares this selling of souls to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot:

[Such a Black person] ... sold his soul for 30 pieces of silver and finds that he is in fact not acceptable to the White society he sought to join. These are colourless White lackeys who live in a marginal world of unhappiness. They are extensions of the enemy into our ranks.¹⁸

Such an action, by a Black person, causes such a Black person to lose the right to be considered part of the Black world, because he or she “props the system up actively”.¹⁹ In contrast to such a person, the rest of the Black world is in a state of powerlessness. These Blacks (the rest) are living a life of two-faced behaviour with fear at the heart of it. They are “a race of beggars who smile at the enemy and swear at him in the sanity of their toilets; who shout ‘Baas’ willingly during the day and call the White man a dog in their buses as they go home”.²⁰

Due to this fear, the Blacks speak ill of their own people who are harassed by the security forces of the government. This “logic” was never part of the Black communities. It was found in varying degrees in the Afrikaner and the English communities. Unfortunately, according to Biko, it has found its way into the Black community. This “logic” according to Biko, is “dangerous for it completely misses the point and reinforces irrational action on the part of the security forces”.²¹

As the rest of the Blacks are being turned into a race of beggars, Biko reasserts that the government and its security forces are ruled by fear, in spite of their immense power. They

¹³ Biko, S. 1977. *Op.Cit.*, p. 85. The term *swart gevaar* means “black danger”.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁵ See discussion under: “3.3. The spiritual tools in Black Power: challenging the present and creating a just future.” It is worth mentioning that earlier in this article Maimela became problematic when he accrued to the Whites the right to theologise on and about Black Theology, by referring to such Whites as “symbolically” identifying with the Blacks. I am led to conclude that Maimela succumbed to the whims of White interlocutors who were part of the audience to whom he was addressing in his words.

¹⁶ Biko, S. 1977. *Op cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁷ See the discussion above.

¹⁸ See Biko. *Op cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

occasionally resort to irrational actions in the hope that a show of strength rather than proper intelligence might scare the resisters satisfactorily. Like the White government which lacks intelligence, according to Biko, so too do their forces lack intelligence. Instead of using their intellect to find specific “dangerous” people, they would rather deport or arrest many people.²² This security system is force-oriented rather than intelligence-oriented. “[This type of mentality] stretches from State security to the style of rugby Whites adopt. It has become their way of life.”²³

In turning the Blacks into a race of beggars, the living apart of these races (the Blacks and the Whites) makes the aspirations of the two groups diametrically opposed. Fear is still the fermenting element underlying this diametric opposition. Biko now summarises this fear as a three-tier system of fear. First, the Whites fear the Blacks. Second, the Blacks fear the Whites. Third, the government fears the Blacks and wishes to allay the fears among the Whites, which makes it difficult to establish a rapport between these two segments of the community. To keep the privileges and the comforts for Whites only

[t]he White strategy so far has been to systematically break down the resistance of the Blacks to the point where the latter would accept crumbs from the White table.²⁴

²² Ibid. Here Biko presents an example of the Poqo raids of 1963, during which about 5 000 people were arrested.

²³ See Biko. *Op cit.*, p. 87.

²⁴ Ibid.

The 1987 context: a pre-text

Maimela's work²⁵ of 1987 resonates closest with Biko's 1977 seminal work. Further, Maimela's 1987 work emerged against the backdrop of Afrikaner power at its height. In 1985, President PW Botha's infamous Rubicon speech strengthened the Whites' grip on power and their continued fear of Black people (*swart gevaar*). On 15 August 1985 at the Natal National Party congress, the foreign minister Pik Botha had drafted a paragraph for the speech, announcing the release of Nelson Mandela, and alerted the international community to the momentous statement.

All eyes and ears were on South Africa, but at the crucial moment PW's inner White supremacist had the better of him. He excised the reference to Mandela's release and, harking back to the lager, regurgitated the rhetoric of White fear. He ... emphasized the hoary old NP myth that South Africa was a country of minorities, where political rights had to be exercised as groups rather than individuals ... Botha exhibited the hardy NP trait of purporting to know best when it came to Black aspirations. He assured the audience that Black leaders and "most reasonable South Africans" were opposed to a system of "one man-one vote" in a unitary system.²⁶

Civil society in the West put pressure on South Africa for the release of Mandela. The Rubicon speech²⁷ exacerbated the economic crisis in South Africa. The economy experienced a net outflow of capital. Minister of finance Barend du Plessis had to admit: "[South Africa has] a war economy, a siege economy. There was an international capital war against us."²⁸ The morning after Botha's address, the anti-apartheid lobbying led the major US bank, Chase Manhattan, withheld further loans to South Africa and demanded payment of outstanding debt. Other international banks followed forcing Pretoria into a debt standstill until March 1986 and an intricate renegotiation of repayment terms. The rand lost a third of its value within a week after Botha's speech.

In 1985 and 1986, trade sanctions were imposed against South Africa by the US Congress, the European Community, the Commonwealth, the United Kingdom and other governments. In all, 120 US companies pulled out of local subsidiaries and companies by June 1987. The most damaging impact was made by restrictions on capital and credit, as capital inflows virtually ceased. Within the NP, there were two streams of Afrikaners: the *verligtes* and the *verkrampes*. The *verligtes* wanted to adapt apartheid to capitalist imperatives, while the *verkrampes* wanted the other way round. The *verligtes* had a close relationship with the Afrikaner capitalists and had been wooed away from state interventionist to neo-liberal capitalism from the 1970s. Thus, by the mid-1980s, government's economic policy had many of the hallmarks of neo-liberal policies: a focus on growth as opposed to development, an emphasis on monetary and fiscal discipline, the limitation of inflation and government spending, cutting taxes, supporting small business, and privatising state entities.²⁹

Less than a month after the Rubicon disaster, a delegation of leading representatives of large-scale monopoly capital, fronted by Galvin Relly, travelled to Lusaka to meet with the ANC in exile. There they presented their programme to break the political impasse.³⁰ In 1987 Chris Heunis, the minister of constitutional development, appointed a committee of 40 senior civil servants from non-security departments to investigate and report on ways to break out of the political stalemate. In March of the same year, they presented a report called *Skrik vir niks* (*Nothing scares us*). The report recommended the opening up of negotiations with representatives of all South Africans, universal franchise, the scrapping of discriminatory laws, the lifting of the state of emergency, and the institution of human rights and the rule of law.

The report showed that by the beginning of 1987, senior state officials outside the security establishment had rejected the reformist, piecemeal adjustment of apartheid. They criticised the government's attempts to maintain White domination by denying the legitimate aspirations of Black people. But the report did not get any further. Roelf Meyer, deputy minister of constitutional development, and Barnard were implicated in its blocking, allegedly acting on behalf of PW Botha who wanted to hear nothing of the recommendations.³¹ What followed was state terrorism backed by illegal

²⁵ See Maimela, S. 1987. *Proclaim freedom to my people*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.

²⁶ Van der Westhuizen, C. 2007. *White power & the rise and fall of the National Party*. Cape Town: Zebra, p. 136.

²⁷ For the ANC's response to PW Botha's Rubicon Speech, see Tambo, O. 1985. *Response to PW Botha's 'Rubicon' Speech*. Lusaka, August 16, 1985. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/>

²⁸ Van der Westhuizen, C. *Op cit.*, pp. 136-137.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 139.

³¹ Ibid., p. 140.

activities to weaken opponents of the state.³² Some information on what took place in 1987: a “civil war” termed “Black on Black violence” broke out in Natal especially around Pietermaritzburg; unrest-related incidents reported to be 4 000; 30 000 people in detention; strong statement issued by ANC president Oliver Tambo³³ calling for intensifying of rent boycotts, the youth to form and engage in self-defence units, revolt against the “tyrannical puppet administration” of Bantustans, unconditional release of all political prisoners, and demand for a nonracial, united and democratic South Africa, among other demands.³⁴

It is against this background that Maimela released his seminal work in the same year (1987) called *Proclaim freedom to my people*. In studying this work, the thrust of this article will be to explore his description and analysis of Black Power primarily in relation to Black Theology.

Maimela on Black Power and Black Theology

“We are bound to talk of White or Black Power”: the colour of one’s skin is still a determining factor!

Maimela opened his work by arguing “in South Africa, we cannot avoid talking about Black humanity and White humanity ... [H]umanity is thrown into a situation in which one racial group is powerful while the other is powerless, one racial group dominates and it alone decides for all others.”³⁵ Maimela asserts that in “real South Africa” the colour of one’s skin plays a decisive role, because blackness or whiteness carries enormous economic and sociopolitical significance. The colour of one’s skin either causes one to live an affluent lifestyle in the cities or to be relegated to a life of poverty and insecurity in some barren, remote homeland.

Maimela does not shy away from also stating that the official policy in the country serves to reinforce racial differentiation based on one’s skin colour. This policy determines where one may or may not live, what work one may do, which bus or train one may or may not use, and which school or university one may or may not attend. This policy also decides “what Church one may or may not belong to”.³⁶ All this is evidence that we are not just people in general:

[This is] because it makes a fundamental difference whether one is Black or White. And for this reason we are bound to talk also about White or Black power ... [T]o talk about real and concrete South Africa from the point of view of Black people is to talk about White power structure, which has organized society in such a way that one racial group is favoured at the expense of the other groups. We have to do here with a White power which has ordered society in such a way that Whites will be provided with absolute security, while Blacks are relegated to the position of powerlessness, dependency and deprivation.³⁷

Maimela’s analysis invokes Biko’s argument on the power that the Whites have, their enforcing of respect through the use of the security forces, all with the sole intent of enforcing the powerlessness of the Blacks. Again agreeing with Biko, Maimela asserts that Black people continue to suffer oppression and various forms of deprivation, which stretch from the first encounter between Whites and Blacks to the present time. Apartheid is not new, because “under [it] ..., racial domination has merely been perfected and made more effective”.³⁸ To be born Black is to be doomed to a life of second-class citizenship and to receive a third-rate education, if any at all. Maimela goes beyond Biko’s analysis to state that under White power structures, to be Black means that one is not good enough to be a human being. While Biko argued that the existence of a Black person is turned, daily, into a “living crisis”, Maimela adds to Biko’s analysis that this crisis means that, according to White power structures, the Black people are not human.

The imagery and the meaning of the concept of Black in much of the western religious world has been a portrayal of all that is undesirable. Borrowing from the Bible, Maimela speaks of examples such as evil blacking our hearts and Jesus washing our hearts whiter than snow. Blackness, therefore, is something bad and unwanted and a sign of sadness. While Biko argued, from a political perspective,

³² Ibid.

³³ See Tambo, O. 1987. *A call to the people of South Africa, May 1987*.

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Maimela, S. 1987. “Black Power and Black Theology in Southern Africa”. In, Maimela, S. 1987. *Proclaim freedom to my people: essays on religion and politics*. Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, p. 63.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

that the existence of the Black person was a crisis, Maimela did the same from a theological perspective:

... Blacks often found it extremely difficult to accept themselves as persons in a world in which 'Whiteness' symbolizes what is good and even Jesus the Saviour is portrayed as a White male.³⁹

It is against this backdrop that Black Theology arose. To summarise, Black Theology that shies away from addressing the question of Black Power is nothing other than, borrowing from Biko's phrase concerning the Black sellouts, "not part of the Black world". Black Power needs to be central, real and concrete in Black Theology.

Black Power: an answer to the White power⁴⁰ structure

Black Power is about Black positive self-affirmation. It means the Blacks are no longer prepared to have their humanity defined and limited by White power structures. Blacks affirm that they have a legitimate form of human existence authorised by God the Creator of all beings. The Blacks need to affirm their authentic God-given right in a world dominated by Whiteness. For Blacks to assert their power, it is about re-birth, for these reasons:

[T]hey are living in a world in which Blacks are taught from childhood and through textbooks at school that to be Black is to be a "non-White", and something inferior which is less than "White".⁴¹

In other words, Blacks are defined in White imagery and lifestyles. Biko and Maimela refute this definition of a Black person. To recap, when Blacks assert their power, they are being reborn. In other words, a Black person who does not espouse Black Power has not undergone total conversion and never experienced new birth. Black Power is part of the salvation act or conversion of any Black person. It is an integral element of salvation for a Black person. It is not only about the salvation of the soul. It is also about a "new state of mind", which makes it possible for one to affirm that one is a person in one's own right and "therefore has the right to determine one's destiny"⁴² here on earth in the real and concrete life:

Black Power and Black Theology [are] a conscious and systematic reflection in the light of the Black experience.⁴³

Like Biko, who acknowledged that the Blacks' oppression by the Whites started as far back as the moment the Whites set foot in South Africa, Maimela further adds and dates Black Theology and Black Power to the very same time: when the Blacks were trying to assert themselves against the White establishment. (It is only that these terms were popularised in the 1960s and 1970s.) To this effect he presents examples of the founding of the earliest African Independent Churches (AICs). Then, the Blacks concluded that the only way to oppose White power was to create their own Black Power organisation.

In developing this argument, Maimela presents the formation of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. However, prior to introducing the formation of the Pan African Congress (PAC) in 1960, he (dis)qualifies the ANC for having "resisted White power through dialogue, non-violence campaigns without any tangible results".⁴⁴ The banning of these formations created an atmosphere of lull and vacuum in Black politics. Thus when Black Theology and Black Power were popularised, in the late 1960s, the wrong impression was created that they were importations from America. This cannot be, according to Maimela, because it would deny these concepts their authentic South African-ness.

Given the vacuum that occurred due to this banning, new leadership emerged in 1969 through the formation of the South African Students' Organization (SASO). This leadership was largely urban and was the product of the policy of separate development. The organisation opted for polarisation as a

³⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

⁴⁰ I intentionally write the first letters of the wording Black Power in capital letters and the p of power of White power in lower case lettering. This is to foreground the seriousness of the Power and the real Power that the Blacks must have. This is not power theorized but one that has to be acquired in the social, political, economic and spiritual sense.

⁴¹ Maimela, S. 1987. *Op cit.*, p. 65.

⁴² Ibid., p. 66.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

strategy to build up the necessary Black leadership, who would negotiate from the position of strength and quality with their White counterparts. But SASO soon realised that the biggest obstacle for Blacks to attain their freedom lay in their own attitudes and state of mental slavery. In order to change this, SASO advocated a philosophy of Black Consciousness:

with the aim to liberate [the] Blacks from their self-inflicted mental and psychological bondage ... to make Blacks aware that they are not poor ... by accident but that they were made powerless and dependent by another group ... their situation ... maintained by White power structures by various methods and techniques.⁴⁵

Integral to Black Theology and Black Power is Black Consciousness. In asserting Black Power, Black Consciousness calls Black people back to their personhood, never again to allow themselves to be made perpetual foreigners in the land of their birth. The Blacks need to become subjects of their own history and destiny. Black Consciousness is a philosophical outlook, a critique of White power structures and a force to galvanise the Black people into a resistant power group aiming to transform existing oppressive structures of apartheid.

[Black Consciousness is] ... an integral part and [a] sophisticated extension of Black Power manifesting Black resistance to White racial domination stretching from the colonial times to the present.⁴⁶

The three concepts – Black Theology, Black Power and Black Consciousness – are intrinsically connected. Black Theology cannot be such a theology without Black Power and Black Consciousness. While Black Consciousness deconstructs the mental slavery of the Black people, Black Power needs to occupy the mental space that mental slavery used to occupy. In addition to the mental space, Black Power asserts the presence of Black people in an actual sociopolitical and economic space – and Black Theology provides theological tools for the total transformation of the Black people. This cathartic rebirth makes sense to and can best be made real by the Black people.

The spiritual tools in Black Power: the Biblical God of liberation gives Black Power

Spirituality and the sociopolitical and economic context are intertwined. There is a “healthy permanent tension” between them. It ought not to be forgotten that Christianity and colonial conquests in South Africa went together. The White oppressors used Christianity to justify their actions and justify their White power base.⁴⁷ With the emergence of Black Power or Black Consciousness (an articulated and sophisticated Black resistance to White power), a new theological climate in South Africa was created. This climate swept through the churches with a largely Black membership. This gave birth to Black Theology, which seeks to interpret the oppressive conditions of the Black people “in the light of the biblical witness to a God whose justice requires that the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden be set free”.⁴⁸ The Biblical stories of liberation and freedom resonate well with this theology, such as the freeing of the Israelites from the hands of the Pharaoh, for example. In wrestling with White power and its oppressive structures, it invites humanity beyond present oppressive structures to a future free of oppressive structures.

Black Theology, in making use of Black Power and Black Consciousness, spares no one from accounting for the oppressed state of the Black person. The Whites are to account for their oppressive acts, the Blacks for their mental slavery, and God for His or Her role while such a history unfolded. The Black Theologians pose fundamental existential questions. For example: Why does the God of love allow Black children, whom the Creator loves, to suffer so much injustice at the hands of White children whom God also loves, if God has created us all and loved us all? And many more questions.⁴⁹ These questions are about the relevance of the Christian faith in the context of the Black people. There is no room for a western Theology which is irrelevant to the Black experience.

Black Theology affirms that God has authorised Black existence as a legitimate form of human existence and Black people are created in His or Her image. Since the Biblical God wills freedom for the underdog and is essentially the God of liberation, such a God has therefore not authorised

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁷ For more on this, see Comaroff, J & J. 1991. *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago: Chicago Press.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

⁴⁹ See Maimela. *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

enslavement and the domination of the Black people. Given that the Biblical God is a God who sided with the poor, it resonates well that such a God would side with the Blacks against White power structures and oppressors. The Blacks' struggle for power is not against God's will but, since God wills that all people should be free, He or She is the same God that gives the Black people the Black Power⁵⁰ to overcome oppressive White injustices. The God of Liberation is the God of Black Theology because Black Theology is a theology that calls for the liberation of the Black people from oppression and the liberation of the White people from being oppressors. This is theology "of liberation par excellence".⁵¹

Black Theology is a theology that makes sense to the Black people as it speaks to their situation. Reconciliation between the Blacks and the Whites is only possible when the Blacks have undergone immersion in Black Power. They can speak of reconciliation from the sense of self-power that they shall attain. An authentic Black experience of hardship can only be experienced by Black people with Black skins. This is an ontological experience. This experience is not imagined; but it is real – it is authentic. Ontologically, this theology is limited to the Black people and their concerns.

Symbolically, "Black" refers to any situation of enslavement, domination and oppression. This refers to any people who find themselves in any such situation. These people may happen to have Black skins or White skins but find themselves in a situation where they are being exploited. The fate of such people is similar to the historical experience of the Black people. The issue here is a situation of oppression rather than of skin colour. It is in this sense that Blackness is an attitude of the mind

that is not poor, oppressed and deprived by accident or by chance but one ... made poor, oppressed and deprived by the other people who happen to be oppressors, exploiters and the ruling elite.⁵²

Post-script: Black Theology (our necessary conscience) is here to stay!

Another strand, likewise impressive, in Maimela's work and analysis, is his argument on the eternal future of Black Theology. We cannot wish our skin colours away: they are with us in the now and into the future. He argues that a perfect state of justice is not possible because of humankind's propensity towards evil due to sin. Thus, even after the problem of racial oppression is resolved, Black Theology as a theology of liberation is still critical and desirable. Oppression is based not only on race but has other bases as well. However, this point should not cause us in South Africa to re-arrange the liberation agenda of addressing racial oppression.

While we are addressing racial oppression, we are therefore not ignorant that racial oppression is only one oppression. Black Theology is a necessary conscience to keep drawing society's attention to the injustices and oppression prevailing in society. Black Theology makes calls on society to reconstruct human relationships. Black Theology invites us to become agents for the transformation of sinful and unjust social institutions. Black Power is the heart, while Black Consciousness is the soul of Black Theology. To speak of Black Theology without Black Power is tantamount to speaking about a Black person who is not Black – a misnomer!

Works consulted

- Biko, S 2005. *I write what I like*. Craighall: Picador Africa.
- Boesak, AA 19–. *Farewell to innocence: a socio-ethical study on Black Theology and Black Power*. Kampen: Kok.
- Cleage, AB (Jr) 1995. *The Black Messiah*. New Jersey: Africa World.
- Comaroff, J & Comaroff, J. 1991. *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago: Chicago.
- Cone, JH 1969. *Black Theology and black power*. New York: Seabury.
- Gardiner, JJ & Roberts, JD 1971. *Quest for a Black Theology*. Philadelphia. Pilgrim.
- Hill, RL 1999. Disrupted/disruptive movements: Black Theology and Black Power 1969/1999, in *Black faith and public talk: critical essays on James H Cone's Black Theology and black power*, edited by D Hopkins. Maryknoll: Orbis.

⁵⁰ To problematise this, I would argue that God gives the Black people Black Power and not just power. This power is intrinsically Black Power because it is relevant to their weakness (caused by White power) and their context. Only the Black people need Black Power because only they lived under the white oppression that was perpetrated on and against them. Black Power is therefore not transferable to any other race.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵² Ibid., p. 72.

- Hopkins, D (ed.) 1999. *Black faith and public talk: critical essays on James H Cone's Black Theology and black power*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Lincoln, CE (ed.) 1974. *The black experience in religion*. New York: Anchor.
- Maimela, SS 1984. *God's creative activity through the law: a constructive statement towards a theology of transformation*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Maimela, SS 1987. *Proclaim freedom to my people*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.
- Maimela, SS 1989. *We are one voice*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.
- Motlhabi, M 1972. Black Theology – personal opinion, in *Essays on Black Theology*, edited by M Motlhabi, 53-59. Johannesburg: Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement.
- Mosala, I & Tlhagale, B 1986. *The unquestionable right to be free*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Tambo, O 1985. *Response to PW Botha's 'Rubicon' speech*. Lusaka, August 16, 1985. Available: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/>.
- Tambo, O 1987. *A call to the people of South Africa*. May 1987. Available: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/>.
- Van der Westhuizen, C 2007. *White power and the rise and fall of the National Party*. Paarl: Zebra.