

**Preferential option for the poor in the current context
of poverty in South Africa:
doing liberation theology in the footsteps of Simon Maimela**

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Abstract

Maimela made an immense contribution to theological discourse in South Africa, with global implications and in dialogue with the rest of the theological world. The article is particularly interested in the area of liberation theology, especially its preferential option for the poor to which Maimela made some monumental contributions. For his contribution Maimela deserves a special place in the history of the theological developments and modern trends in theology both in the world and in Africa. The article maintains that years after liberation and the dawn of democracy in South Africa, there is still need for liberation theology and its phrase “preferential option for the poor” given the prevalent poverty and associated socio-economic and political conditions in South Africa. As theologians “do theology” in the South African context, they have to adopt this preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Only then can they contribute to transformation of society, an agenda to which Maimela is committed.

Introduction

It is a great honour and privilege to make a humble contribution to academic efforts to honour Professor Simon Maimela, an intellectual giant whose “sandals I am not worthy to untie”. As a theologian he made significant contributions to theological developments in Africa, which according to Maimela and König (1998:3) “needed to be brought to the attention of the rest of the theological world”. The history of theological developments in the world and in particular in South Africa should therefore have a special place for Simon Maimela and the immense contribution to theological discourse that he made. The theological contribution that Maimela made over the years is not neutral but committed to the transformation of society. It is committed to overcoming human oppression. He remarked about liberation theology that “it is directed against major social evils of our time and claims to offer a new way of doing theology that contributes to overcoming human oppression” (Maimela 1993:54). While his contribution is wide ranging and encyclopaedic, the interest of this article is focussed on the area of liberation theology, especially its insistence on the literal (material) poor and the “divine preferential option for the poor” and its relevance to South Africa in the current context of poverty.

Review of literature on the preferential option for the poor

Liberation theologians uphold an unapologetic consensus with regard to the controversial phrase, “preferential option for the poor”. This viewpoint has been controversial since the dawn of liberation theology in Latin America and later in other parts of the world such as the USA and South Africa. One could not articulate it better than Dorr (1983:243) who said the following about the controversial phrase that is very common in literature on liberation theology:

The phrase burst upon the ecclesiastical scene only a few years ago. Since then it has become the most controversial religious term since the Reformers cry, “salvation by faith alone”.

Nolan (1985:188) acknowledged the controversial nature of the phrase in his statement that Dorr is not exaggerating, for this phrase challenges churches and theologians in a very fundamental way (cf. Gutiérrez 2005:19). In fact, according to Nolan (1987:1), it is not only the phrase that is controversial, but the whole theology of liberation has become a controversial subject in South Africa. He was writing in the context of apartheid South Africa during the time of repression and the State of Emergency that was declared on June 1986. Now that official apartheid is gone from the statutes, and all citizens are able to cast their votes and even be in parliament and in government, can we say that

liberation theology is no longer controversial and necessary? There are still millions of people, predominantly black, to whom the fruits of a liberated and democratic South Africa are elusive. Hence the need of this preferential option for the poor and oppressed. We may no longer have a political crisis marked by repression and States of Emergency, but we still have an economic crisis. Therefore there is still the need to “do theology” in the context of poverty and oppression in South Africa. There is still a need for a theology that is against all forms of suffering, oppression and injustice in the world.

Liberation theologians, including Maimela (1998:118) agree that God is not a neutral God but

a thoroughly biased God who was (*and is still*) always taking the side of the oppressed, of the weak, and of the exploited, of the hungry, homeless and of the scum of society.

According to Maimela (1993:59), God is the God who expresses a divine concern for the underdogs. These are the people who are pushed to the underside of history (Rieger 1998:1). Liberation theology insists on the preferential option for the oppressed and marginalized, which according to Maimela (1986:106) is not only based on the compassionate feeling for the underdogs, but on a biblical revelation. Maimela (1986:106) goes on to articulate this as follows:

According to black theology, God has already taken sides with the oppressed, the outcasts and despised, when God elected to liberate Israel from Egyptian bondage. It is the preferential option for the poor which was brought to a new height in the coming of Jesus, who was himself a poor and oppressed man of sorrows, who suffered and was crucified as the criminal and the rejected outcast. In the light of this revealed preferential option thrust, black theologians, struggling for justice, believe that Christians and churches must also take the side of the poor, to claim solidarity with them in their struggle, thereby liberating the oppressed from misery and marginality, and bringing down the powerful from their thrones (cf. Martey 1993:97).

This viewpoint grants the poor and oppressed a hermeneutical privilege, which is the result of a rereading of the Bible and is emphasised by all liberation theologies (Martey 1993:97). Of course this is at the displeasure of conservatives, some liberal theologians and counter-revolutionaries, many of whom do not care about the lot of the poor and the oppressed. All they want to prescribe for the poor is superficial charity and an “ambulance ministry” that maintain the status quo. In agreement with this hermeneutical privilege, Bosch (1991:436), an Afrikaner theologian who was way ahead of his time, maintains that the poor are entitled to what liberation theologians refer to as “an epistemological privilege”. It means that the liberation of the poor and oppressed is epistemologically central (cf. Nicholson 1990:164). According to liberation theologians, God is unequivocally on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Segundo (1993:125) also emphasises this preferential option for the poor by saying, “I do not believe that there is any other way of expressing the option of the poor concretely than to say it is God’s compassion for the most afflicted.”

One of the founding pioneers of liberation theology, Gutiérrez (1988), argues that an option for the poor is an option for the Kingdom of God. Liberation theologians insist that this preferential option for the poor is biblical and theological. Bosch (1991:436) argues that there can be no doubt that in the Bible there is significant focus on the poor and their plight. The poor are entitled to what liberation theologians call “an epistemological privilege” (cf. Bosch 1991:436). According to this preferential option for the poor, the church is expected to be “the church of the poor and to demonstrate solidarity with the poor” (Boff 1988:24; cf. Bosch 1991:436). Our theological discourse should also be on the side of the poor and the oppressed. The entire Bible, beginning with Cain and Abel, through the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt, the times of the prophets and exilic periods mirror God’s predilection for the weak and the abused of human history. In agreement with the biblical foundations of this preferential option for the poor, Domeris (1986:57) points out that “God’s concern with the poor is a recurrent theme in both the Old and New Testaments”. Placing the argument within the South African context, Domeris (1986:57) argues that,

(g)iven the central place allocated to this theme in liberation theology, it is not surprising to find that the category of the poor and their place within the salvation planned by God has become a major issue for South African churches.

This preferential option for the poor should still be a major issue in South Africa today given the extent of their suffering and dehumanisation as a result of poverty.

Is liberation theology a passing fad?

Liberation theology is not and should not be allowed to be a passing fad as long as there is poverty, oppression, dehumanisation, exploitation, gender discrimination, etc. It certainly makes many supporters of the status quo uncomfortable and some even wrongly dismiss it as a Marxist-influenced viewpoint, communism in religious garb, undue mixing of religion with politics, unscientific and not compliant with theological standards normally associated with Western theology that claim to be universal. Maimela (1993:59) notes without any surprise that liberation theology and its preferential option for the poor will always be met with hostility by its critics. He said,

As is to be expected, the assertion that the Church should take a preferential option for the poor and be the advocate and defender of the oppressed has invoked great hostility from both the conservative and liberal theologians, who interpret it to mean that God is now portrayed as against the rich and the white Christians (Maimela 1993:59).

Western theology has not always accepted the fact that it is and should be contextual. Rather it pretended to be universal and aloof from context and still does that. Writing in the context of the broader field of Biblical Studies, West says that the methodology of the First World, which is regarded as a universally valid norm, has recently been challenged (West 1995:16; cf. West 1999:12). At least Third World (developing world) theologies have made an honest concession that all theology, including liberation theology, is contextual. Miguez Bonino (2004:131) also says that theology has always been contextual, implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or even against the will of theologians and the powers that be in ecclesiastical circles. Whether the conservative and liberal theologians like it or not, liberation theology is there to stay, with its preferential option for the poor, which is regarded as divine. For as long as we still have the poor with us, as Jesus Christ stated, we will always have the need to “do theology”, in contrast to “thinking theology”, in the context of those who are poor and oppressed. This poverty is what liberation theologians such as Gutiérrez (1990:8) refer to as “institutionalised violence” which is as bad as death (cf. Gutiérrez 1996:26). The hostile critics of liberation theology display a strange kind of insensitivity when they rubbish liberation theology and its commitment to those who are subjected to this institutionalised violence, which is rife, particularly in the developing countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa.

The need for liberation theology as necessitated by poverty and oppression in the South African context

Even though apartheid is supposed to have died more than a decade ago, many of the socio-economic and political problems that necessitated black theology are still prevalent. These are problems that black theologians insist are “man-made”, i.e. they are created by human beings. Some years back, Maimela (1984:101) referred to black theology as “a product of an awareness that black oppression and black exploitation are man made (sic)”. According to Maimela (1986:101), God had nothing to do with this oppression and exploitation of black people. Blacks are not poor and oppressed by accident or by divine design. Instead they are made poor, powerless and oppressed by the rich and socio-politically powerful whites (Maimela 1986:102). Maimela (1993:55) goes on to argue that

(i)t is in fact human beings and not gods, who are the creators of exploitative structures, it was then just a matter of time before modern historical consciousness would reach the momentous conclusion, namely some people are oppressed and suffer because they have been denied by the ruling elite the right to become architects of their own destiny. In other words, what is new in this situation is the awareness by oppressed groups and individuals that they are not poor by accident or on account of laziness on their part, but rather they are made poor and dependent by their human oppressors who deny them a voice in the shaping of human society and history.

While there have been significant changes in South Africa since 1994 when the African National Congress became the governing party in a democratic dispensation, poverty and the socio-economic and political structures that cause it continue to wreak havoc in especially black peoples' lives. Although the government and Parliament consist mainly of blacks, taking over the political power has not yet eradicated poverty nor eliminated oppression. Having a few black millionaires from the politically connected elite as a result of the narrowly designed Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) has not yet transformed the economic realities of the majority of the citizens of South Africa. (cf.

Buffel 2007:64). Although there have been some positive changes in South Africa since 1994, South Africa remains high on the list of countries plagued by income inequality (cf. Mbuli 2008).

All theology is and should be contextual

When doing theology (reflection) and when acting (pastoral action) out our faith (praxis), it is always important to take due cognisance of context. It was context that led to the birth of liberation theology (theologies in various contexts). Equally, it is context that continues to necessitate the need for liberation theology (and contextual theologies) in South Africa and all other contexts marked by poverty and oppression. Any theology that ignores context is worthless and not worth pursuing. Context is both the framework and part of the source material for doing theology (Parrat 2004:9). In this context we refer to “doing theology” and not merely “thinking theology” nor inventing theological theories in the ivory towers of academic institutions. The latter process (of only thinking theology) can only respond to questions that people are not asking. In this case the elite, the conservatives and some liberal theologians are asking questions and answering them without listening to the people whom they serve and to whom they should be accountable. Therefore all theology should be contextual, in other words it should arise from a specific historical and material context and should address that context. All theology needs to do is to be honest about its “contextual nature”. In raising the importance of context, De Gruchy (1986:36) says,

When people forget context and crisis they turn abstract, detached, ideological, remote and unhelpful. However when they remember context and crisis they show their identification with the people who are subjects and objects of Christian ministry.

According to Clinebell (1984:14), if context is not taken into consideration the church and its theologians are in danger of being confronted by irrelevance. Who can boldly and without any fear of contradiction argue that God was not contextual in his dealings with humanity from the beginning of creation through to the climax reached in the salvation won through Jesus Christ? Who can boldly argue that Jesus himself was not contextual in his dealings with his followers and opponents alike? How can the church afford not to be contextual in its ministry? Can theologians afford not to be contextual? Can theological discourse afford not to be contextual? Therefore context and the impact it should have on shaping theological reflection (discourse) and pastoral actions (ministry) cannot be underestimated. As Nolan and Broderick (1987:12) state, all theology, including liberation theology, is and has always been contextual (cf. Bonino 2004:131).

Poverty, a widespread global phenomenon

Despite the relative wealth and prosperity that are part of our contemporary world, there are billions of people in the world for whom poverty is not merely an academic notion but an existential reality. According to Smith (2005:1), we live in a relatively affluent era in comparison with the past. The majority of those who live in poverty live in the developing world. It does not matter how hard the poor work or what they do to escape from poverty, it remains a trap from which it is difficult to extricate themselves, though, not necessarily impossible. This poverty is entrenched in the socio-economic and political structures of the world. Smith (2005:157) sees poverty as a trap when he says: “Poverty is a cruel trap. For many of the unfortunate people who are ensnared in this painful leg-hold, escape on their own can be but impossible.” This poverty trap – which is often referred to as “structural poverty” – is much more than just lack of income. Instead the very conditions of poverty make it likely that poverty will even continue tomorrow (cf. Terreblanche: 2002:263; Smith 2005:11). Mveng (1994:157) is also of the opinion that poverty is structural. While agreeing with both Smith and Mveng that poverty is structural, I would like to add that it is also anthropological, political and theological. It is not an accident of history that billions of people are poor. Neither is it inherently their fault that they remain poor. In some quarters the poor are often blamed for their poverty and wrongly accused of laziness. The world was designed that way and poverty is entrenched in the socio-economic and political structures of our societies (cf. Buffel 2007). As Maimela (1986: 101, 102) argued, even God had nothing to do with poverty or its perpetuation. The South African situation is a living example of poverty that is structural and entrenched in socio-economic and political structures. Sixteen years after political liberation, the majority of the people are still living in poverty, which is worsening in many respects. For them, the more things change, the more they remain the same, if they do not become worse, especially in terms of the inequality gap between the poor and the rich (cf. Saayman 2008:19). Boff and Pixley (1989:3) state that poverty is systemic and entrenched in the systems of our society:

The poor are poor because they are exploited or rejected by a pervasive economic system. This is exploitative and an excluding system which means the poor suffer and are oppressed, it means the system keeps them under it or outside it.

That poverty will continue to exist is almost a forgone conclusion. This is in line with the often-quoted dictum that “the rich become richer while the poor become poorer”. The world’s socio-economic and political order seems to be designed that way. According to Mveng (1994:160), “(I)t is based on the endless enrichment of some and the impoverishment of others.” Mveng (1994:160) calls this a “hellish cycle of poverty”. It is a vicious cycle in which the poor are forever trapped. That it is structural implies that the socio-economic and political structures are designed in a way that ensures that the poor remain poor and the rich get richer. At best, efforts to reform such structures only tamper with the periphery without necessarily totally transforming them. If change is left to the system or its agents, only cosmetic changes are made. Theological reflection or discourse that does not grapple with these socio-economic and political realities is aloof from context and therefore useless and irrelevant. If our efforts at doing theology are not contributing to the discourse geared towards the transformation of society, as most of Maimela’s writings were, those efforts border on irrelevance.

Poverty is a widespread global phenomenon that is more concentrated and severe in the developing world than in the First World, and especially in Africa. The scale of poverty in the global context is immense, despite the fact that as a result of technological and scientific advancements we live in a relatively affluent era in comparison with the past (cf. Smith 2005:1). Poverty is a phenomenon that does not seem to be under control, but is forever increasing. The World Bank (2000:83) states that the dimensions of poverty are worsening in many parts of the world. The number of the poor is bound to increase if nothing drastic is done to address this problem. Watkins (1995:4) points out that if “(l)eft unchecked, poverty will continue to claim victims on a growing scale”. Watkins (1995:4) calculates that based on present trends, the number of people living in poverty could rise to 1,5 billion by the year 2025. If this speculation is anywhere close to reality the consequences will be too ghastly to contemplate and it will be an indictment on all of us for allowing poverty to increase without any challenge, including challenge from a theological perspective.

The World Bank estimates that more than half of the population of Africa live in poverty on barely 65 US cents per day (*less than a dollar*) (World Bank 2000:83). Smith makes the same point with regard to the seriousness of the problem of poverty, and says that about 20 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are poorer than they were a generation ago (Smith 2005:1). Comparing the real income of the average person in Africa to that of an American, that of the latter is 50 times more than that of an African in the Sub-Saharan region (Smith 2005:1). It is furthermore estimated that the number of poor in this region are expected to rise from 314 million in 2001 to 366 million in 2015 (Fox and Liebenthal 2006: xiii). Poverty on the African continent is not only an individual problem, but also a social and political one (World Bank 2000:84). This is in line with Mveng’s (1994:155) statement that “(p)overity as we experience it today in Africa is indeed a political problem”. Poverty is a multidimensional socio-economic and political problem. It is also a religious problem to which the Christian church and all faith-based communities have to respond appropriately. As such it is a problem that theologians cannot brush aside.

Poverty in South Africa

In the South African context, poverty is very unique in the sense that it is in contrast to other countries where poverty knows no colour. In South Africa it is mainly concentrated amongst blacks, without necessarily denying that there are whites who are poor. The South African situation is exacerbated by racist legislation of the past; hence South African poverty has very strong racial dimensions (cf. Mbuli 2008:5). The apartheid regime has inevitably bequeathed its racist legacy to the new South Africa. When the regime transferred political power following the elections of 1994, the economic power remained in the hands of a minority although political power is in the hands of the black majority. What Wilson and Ramphela (1989:4) said some decades ago is still valid in South Africa, namely that the degree of inequality is greater here than in any other country. According to Mbuli (2008:1), it is estimated that between 45 and 57% of South Africans are engulfed by poverty. In terms of the Gini coefficient, South Africa has the highest measure of inequality of the 57 countries for which data is available (Wilson & Ramphela 1989:4). The Gini-co-efficient is estimated to be between 0,58 and 0,72 by the World Bank (cf. Mbuli 2008:1; Saayman 2008:30). In South Africa poverty is characterised by the following:

- the width of the gulf between the rich and the poor, i.e. the degree of inequality
- poverty existing as a result of a deliberate policy

- racist laws that were an assault on people's humanity reinforced material poverty in South Africa (Whereas racist legislation has been almost entirely removed from the statutes, the legacy of racist policies still remains.)

There is consensus amongst researchers that South Africa is an upper middle-class country with a per capita income similar to other countries such as Botswana, Brazil, Malaysia and Mauritius (Whiteford & Mcgrath 1994:1; cf. May 1998:1; Barberton et al 1998:13). Expressing the same point May (1998:1) says:

In per capita income terms South Africa is an upper middle class (sic) income country but most African households experience outright poverty or vulnerability to becoming poor. In addition the distribution of income and wealth in South Africa is the most unequal in the world.

Whereas South Africa is a middle-class income country, i.e. a land of plenty, the majority of blacks (black Africans, Indians and coloureds) live below the breadline. They are excluded from enjoying this relative wealth of the country. Writing in a global context and lamenting the conditions of poverty in that context, Smith (2005:5) expresses some optimism, when he says, "The good news is that the world produces enough food for all" (Smith 2005:5). This is a contradiction of our society. Poverty is prevalent in the midst of plenty. The author agrees with Dickinson (1983:3) who pointed out these contradictions when he said, "we live in the midst of paradoxes". Despite being the wealthiest country in Africa and being a middle-class income country, South Africa displays human development more often associated with low-income countries (Whiteford 1995:1). In relative terms, South Africa is not necessarily a poor country. Whereas the reality of "a not so poor country" may be a reality to the rich whites in South Africa, to the majority of black South African citizens, it is far from the truth. It is for that reason that researchers agree that South Africa has the most unequal distribution of income and wealth (May 1998:1; cf. Wilson and Ramphela 1989:4; Whiteford & Mcgrath 1994:1; Bruggemans 2003:16). The South African situation is marked by what some researchers call "extreme income inequality" (Barberton et al 1998:13). Furthermore destitution, hunger, homelessness and overcrowding, illiteracy, the HIV and aids pandemic and other ills associated with poverty such as crime and violence mark the South African situation. All these co-exist side by side with affluence. This is the context in which we have to develop and practise pastoral work, as well as do theology, both as practitioners and as theologians.

It is estimated that more than half of the households in South Africa are living in poverty, i.e. below the minimum living level (MLL). According to researchers more than 50% of the South African population are rated as poor and they live on less than R12-00 per day (Pieterse 2001:ix; cf. May 2000:32;). The reality is that blacks do not enjoy the fruits of the natural and other resources of the country in the same way that whites do, except of course for those few politically connected elites who have benefited from the Black Economic Empowerment. In relative terms, South Africa is a wealthy country. In fact by the standards of the developing world South Africa is the wealthiest country on the African continent, only followed by perhaps Egypt. Emphasising the same point, Roux (1999:146) points out that, "(a)lthough South Africa makes up less than 0,5% of the world economy, on the African continent South Africa is a giant". Roux adds that South Africa is by far the largest economy in Africa, with 28% of the Gross National Product (GNP) produced in South Africa (Roux 1999:146). In the Sub-Saharan region, South Africa is unequalled as the most developed country. Sunter (1987) concurs with Roux that South Africa is a relatively successful and the most sophisticated country in Africa. He particularly cites its excellent infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, electricity grid, etc. In terms of development, South Africa is second to none in comparison to the rest of Africa. Sunter (1987:86) points out that, "(t)he unfortunate thing is that all areas of the country do not enjoy the same quality of infrastructure". Those who have the odds stacked against them in terms of infrastructure development are blacks, whose areas are still subjected to underdevelopment and neglect.

Practical implications of the option for the poor in the South African context

The practical implication of this preferential option for the poor is that, through its conscientisation efforts, it must seek to arouse and mobilise the poor and oppressed to take a firm stand against poverty, oppression and suffering and join the God of the Exodus and of Jesus the Christ (the liberator) to become instruments of their own liberation (Martey 1993:98). According to Nolan an interesting thing about the Exodus story it is that the poor and oppressed, on their part, must fight for their own cause. He clarifies the point as follows:

The option for the poor is almost thought of as a commitment which the non-poor have to make to the cause of those who are oppressed. But what is far more fundamental in the Bible is the option of the poor for their own cause (Nolan 1985:192).

Boff and Pixley (1989:xi) once wrote, "People are divided by the stand they take on poverty." The words tempt one to apply this to theologians and their theological discourses, who can also be divided by the stand they take on poverty. In the South African context theologians must do theology in the accompaniment of the poor, alongside and together with the poor. In our theological work and our ministry we have no option but to side with the poor of the world. It is generally agreed that God is on the side of the poor. I subscribe to that view. Our theology and our reflections must also adopt the preferential option for the poor, which is in fact biblical. Therefore the church and its theology must also concretely express this option for the poor. If God is unequivocally on the side of the poor, can the church afford to be on a different side? Can our theological discourse afford to ignore the realities experienced by the poor? Can the church afford to ignore the agency of the poor? The answer is an unequivocal No! Thus theological reflection and pastoral actions cannot afford to proceed unchallenged with their usual apathy towards the socio-economic and political conditions and the plight of the poor.

Conclusion

Liberation theology, with its insistence on the preferential option for the poor is still an absolute and unapologetic necessity. Theologians cannot afford to theologise from the ivory towers of academic institutions and pretend to be aloof from the harsh realities that are affecting millions of poor people in the South African context. The prevailing situation of poverty and associated socio-economic and political realities that affect millions who have not yet benefited from the promised "better life for all" are entitled to the epistemological privilege that is advocated by liberation theologians. God, the church and theologians must be on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the discriminated women in view of journeying alongside and together with them in view of "doing theology" out of their context. This is the cause to which Maimela and his theological writings were committed, an example we should emulate in the new context of a politically liberated and democratic South Africa, where millions are still subjected to the "institutionalised violence" of poverty.

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