

**STEVE BIKO'S RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS AND  
THOUGHT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON  
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO THE FEDERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF  
SOUTHERN AFRICA**

*Graham Duncan*

Department of Church History and Church Law,  
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

## **1 HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ISSUES**

There is little actual evidence of Biko's direct relationship with the Federal Theological Seminary (FedSem), which he visited frequently. The relationship was not formal, so there are no references in minutes, reports, et cetera. My approach is not based on oral history/anecdotal material gathered from interviews, but this does not mean that we cannot consider a relationship between Biko and Fedsem. Biko's writings are a major source of information in this regard.

Fedsem has to be seen in conjunction with other theological institutions with which Biko had links. These relationships were not restricted to one level or area of involvement. For example, he may have talked about religious matters in a secular context. Therefore it is difficult to separate the religious domain from his total commitment. He was an African and viewed life holistically, hence his commitment to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). This marked a rejection of "Western dualism which separates the religious and secular aspects of life" (Morphew 1989:159). Besides, his legacy was so extensive that it cannot easily be restricted to one institution.

FedSem was a church institution and Biko had a somewhat negative attitude towards the institutional church. Much of his critique was accurate and enduring, and part of his legacy relates to how his views of the church were integrated in the minds and actions of FedSem students. As has been demon-

strated (Duncan 2003), education may result in one of two general responses: conformity or resistance. Those dichotomous responses were evident at FedSem, which was to a large extent a mission establishment. Biko's long-term legacy might be questioned in light of the limited impact of the church on transformation in a young democracy. While many institutions are in the vanguard of transformation, the church often appears to be fighting a rear-guard action against change. And when we talk of the church we are talking of an institution, many of whose senior ministers and current leaders were trained at FedSem and similar institutions during the 1960s and 1970s. However, this does not detract from the fact that some ordinands and lay people were deeply influenced by Black Consciousness (BC) and its soul mate, Black Theology (BT), and have integrated their insights into their ministries. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this is the involvement of lay persons in the work of ministry and the manner in which ministers became involved in community projects during the apartheid years and beyond as a means of demonstrating solidarity with the oppressed, encouraging them to forge an independent identity and achieve the consequent dignity and self-respect as children of God. Many became community-oriented rather than congregational ministers.

In using Biko's writings as a source, we need to be aware that he was not living in a society that was sensitive to gender issues. Consequently he constantly refers to 'man' in a generic sense.

This paper focuses on what I describe as Biko's religious consciousness and how it relates to various aspects of theology and church practice. I use the term 'religious' in a broad sense, since in African philosophy and religion there is nothing that falls outside its ambit.

## 2 BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS (BC)

Biko's approach in his student days (1966-1972) may be summed up as follows:

There stirred within his consciousness the germ of an idea. This was to flower into a student movement which conscientised blacks to analyse their socio-political condition by recognising that they could be their own liberators through resisting their oppression with a different mental attitude. It was this attitude that became known as "Black Consciousness" (Wilson 1991:23).

Black consciousness "takes cognisance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black" (Biko 1987:53). Interestingly, this is consistent with one of AZAPO's<sup>1</sup> aims: "to promote an interpretation of religion as a liberatory philosophy relevant to the black struggle" (Maphai 1994:130). Further, it is a web of "attitudes, belief systems, cultural and political values" (Maphai 1994:131). For Biko (1987:49),

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I use AZAPO as an example of a political group which co-opted Biko's thinking. This was by no means the only group. However, "AZAPO is particularly popular among university personnel, clergy, journalists and related professions ... AZAPO comprises an intellectual elite in search of a constituency, while the PAC represents a potentially powerful army with disorganised and quarrelling generals ... Black consciousness lives on more as an alternative vision than an organisationally active political party" (Moodley 1991:151). Biko tried to initiate dialogue between the ANC, PSAC, AZAPO, the Unity Movement and other political organisations (Pityana 1991a:255). "The political flexibility of BCM activists was deliberate - a practical outgrowth of their theoretical inclinations, BCM activists gravitated in many political directions" (Halsi 1991:101): cf "some officials of both AZAPO and BCMA have attempted to appropriate the legacy of Black Consciousness themselves. Such attempts indicate a fundamental failure to understand that 'a way of life' cannot be appropriated. The legacy of Black Consciousness spans the whole political spectrum: ANC, PAC, Unity Movement, and many individuals not aligned to any particular political organisation" (Pityana et al 1991:10). This was also evident at FedSem where students co-opted BC according to their political inclinations and affiliations.

... Black consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude.

Regarding issues of integration, Biko rejected 'white liberalism' on the grounds that such integration as they promoted simply encouraged the development of a small elite of blacks, who increasingly became alienated from their compatriots and could achieve little if anything for them (Biko 1987:19ff.).

'Black' meant oppressed (Wilson 1991:24), so BC implied a universalising tendency which defied the barriers imposed by apartheid.

From Biko's perspective, then, BC and black morality meant understanding that the emancipation of blacks and the liberation of society as a whole required the renaissance of the black intellect. This understanding also entailed developing a black political will which, if necessary, would generate a massive insurrection, culminating in the overthrow of white supremacy and the ushering in of black hegemony (Fetton 1986:78). However, this was not the prime aim of BC. Tutu, preaching at Biko's funeral in 1977 (in Tutu 1994:19), advocated a more positive approach: "... until blacks asserted their humanity and personhood, there was not the remotest chance for reconciliation in South Africa." While Biko accepted the possible use of violence, he did not promote it. Tutu was referring to alternative ways of achieving reconciliation, which by definition is inimical to the use of violence.

### **3 RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS**

"Common to most student ideologies of the decade [1960s] was a concern with consciousness, culture, alienation, community and the dimension of everyday life as the most important reference for political activity" (Halisi 1991:109). Pityana (1991a:254) could claim that "Biko built his political system on

spiritual foundations ... spiritual is ... concrete, holistic, bringing the fullness of humanity to bear on the material and objective world". This was because BC envisaged "a way of life, an attitude of mind" (Pityana 1991a:254). So it had significant religious implications and "Biko held high for our people the hope in human values and the triumph of the human spirit" (Pityana 1991a:254).

"In the final analysis, he understood Black Consciousness in terms consistent with his own personal sense of mission – a combination of theoretical honesty and devotion to the cause of liberation" (Halisi 1991:110). Liberation is a unified process; physical liberation cannot be distinguished from psychological liberation. Liberty was predicated on "the power to determine one's destiny" (Sibisi 1991:135). And so it could be said: "... the Black Consciousness Movement was surely of God" (Tutu 2004:ix).

#### **4 CRITIQUE OF THE CHURCH**

Biko's critique of the institutionalised church is important, not only for its own sake but for its potential to influence students, particularly theological students.

Biko was an Anglican by birth and grew up to be a nominal Anglican Christian. "Steve never denied being an Anglican, and this was due chiefly to loyalty to his mother, and to admiration of the quality of her faith" (Stubbs 2004:186). Yet he was inquisitive about religious matters (Stubbs 2004:176); "I learnt to develop a strong faith in God" (letter to Stubbs [1974] 2004:193). He was educated at a Roman Catholic college in Natal where he "found a good number of their teachings either unintelligible or unacceptable" (Stubbs 2004:176). Despite his strong negative views of the church, he continued to take holy communion (Stubbs 2004:203), the sacrament of integration.

Biko's contribution to both the BCM and critique of the church was "to awaken the people: first, from their own psychological oppression through recognising their inferiority complex; secondly, from the physical oppression accruing out of living in a white racist society" (SASO resolution, Woods 1987:161). In

this process he considered the church to be complicit because it “further added to their insecurity by its inward-directed definition of the concept of sin and its encouragement of the *mea culpa* attitude” (Stubbs 2004:31). This was a denial of his positive view of humanity in an African context. As an African Biko was uncomfortable with the doctrine of original sin, which to him was life-denying rather than life-affirming. That is one purpose of conscientisation: “to provide some kind of hope” (Stubbs 2004:126) in an otherwise hopeless situation, a situation characterised as spiritual poverty. “This *is* the first truth ... we have to acknowledge” (Stubbs 2004:31), namely the existence of

... a kind of black man who is man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced ... the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell ... the first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself ... This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of “Black consciousness” (Stubbs 2004:30 31).

Integral to this is an inner process of self-discernment and self-awareness.

Biko’s critique of the church was penetrating. While he had no quarrel with Christianity as such, he was troubled by its manifestation as ‘Church-ianity’, which I define as over-concentration on the church as an institution rather than on Christ, its source and end. He was troubled by the pervasive influence of the church:

- 1 It makes Christianity too much of a “turn the other cheek” religion whilst addressing itself to a destitute people.
- 2 It is stunted with 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 too much specialisation (Stubbs 2004:63).

This was a church which emphasised a false spirituality, because it kept people in bondage. Therefore, concluded Biko, there was a need to deal with the problem of control in churches and to pay greater attention to Black Theology.

A basic problem was the church's way of dichotomising everything, particularly politics and religion, in contradistinction to the holistic African worldview. Many young blacks training for the ministry seemed to accept this simplistic approach rather uncritically, even the dehumanising and demoralising effects of apartheid. This related to the dualistic mindset that dominated the Western theology they were taught. Not surprisingly, Biko adopted a more humanistic approach, for the institutionalised church seemed to be more successful at propagating such a dualistic mindset than at swelling its own numbers. It was certainly not fulfilling an integrating function. This was the challenge offered by SPROCAS 2, a project of the Christian Institute and the SACC, to work out projects to promote justice and peace. One result was the launching of Black Community Programmes (BCP), in which Biko was intimately involved (Ramphela 1995:66). According to Ramphela (1995:213), "development became a tool for conscientising and organising oppressed people". The value of community development projects was that they were "symbols of hope to lift them out of despair and to empower them to liberate themselves" (Ramphela 1991:157). Hence community programmes had a dual purpose: to improve the actual living conditions of suffering people and to liberate them from a debilitating mental attitude. Here the church had proved deficient. While it often presents itself as the only (static) constant (the church of our parents and forebears) in a dynamic society, this contradicts the image of a dynamic church as the product and agent of the Holy Spirit.

Biko's views on obedience to God had serious implications for his view of the church: "To the revolutionary the Church is anti-progress and therefore anti-God's wishes because long ago the Church itself decided to accept the motto 'white is

value” (Stubbs 2004:241). “Choosing the word ‘revolutionary’ distances him from the practice of the Church and seems to enable him the freedom to pursue obedience to ... ‘ultimate conscience’ as opposed to a person’s own conscience” (Wilson 1991:44).

It is important to distinguish Biko’s use of the term ‘church’ from the term ‘denominations’, since he sometimes uses the two interchangeably; he was certainly opposed to the effects of denominationalism (Stubbs 2004:237). He also questioned the need for organised worship. The only value of churches was a “limited role of being man-made institutions attempting to organise into units those who worship God” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:239). The problem was that “[c]hurches have tended to complicate religion and theology and to make it a matter to be understood by specialists”, namely priests (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:238). This implied denial of the Reformed principle of the priesthood of all believers. It made them exclusive and almost like secret (Gnostic?) societies. “The locus of truth is further complicated by denominationalism.” Biko resolves this in the way he discerned truth as being dependent on “my ability to incorporate my vertical relationship with God into the horizontal relationships with my fellow men; in my ability to pursue my ultimate purpose on earth which is to do good” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:238). A recurrent theme in Biko’s thinking is relating on both the horizontal and the vertical levels. Such relationships by definition did not require a formal institution like the church, as horizontal relations could be realised in other social groupings. This was evident in his openness to people: “The parties and shebeening, apart from being an important antidote to his intense lifestyle, also provided the forum, the access to a variety of people he might otherwise not have met [cf. Jesus of Nazareth]” (Wilson 1991:37). For him the value of the church is that it provides a place for occasional reaffirmation of traditional moral convictions. This is something of a contradiction, for in his view it was these very moral convictions that kept people in bondage. However, for many people the church was a significant source of comfort and strength to continue, even if that was linked to maintenance of the status quo.



To this date black people find no message for them in the Bible simply because our ministers are still too busy with moral trivialities ... They constantly urge the people to find fault in themselves and by so doing detract from the essence of the struggle in which the people are involved” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:33-34).

This is an anomaly for black people, for “[w]e believe in the inherent goodness of man” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:46). It is too simplistic a view, however, for too many black people found the church gave them the power to go on. Constantly finding fault with themselves is integral to the Reformed doctrine of the fall. Differentiation is evidently needed between such a mindset and living under an immoral regime justified by that same Reformed tradition. But Biko is correct when he maintains that the church “must rather preach that it is a sin to allow oneself to be oppressed” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:34). He further claimed:

It was the missionaries who confused our people with their new religion ... They further went on to preach a theology of the existence of hell, scaring our fathers and mothers with stories about burning in eternal flames and gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. This cold religion was strange to us but our fore-fathers were sufficiently scared of the unknown pending anger to believe that it was worth a try. Down went our cultural values! (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:49).

This gave way in time to a culture of defiance.

The church as an institution had historically aided and abetted the establishment, justification and practice of apartheid, both theoretically and theologically (cf. Cochrane 1987):

... the problem with the black churches was that they had uncritically swallowed the racist doctrines of

white Christian missionaries ... And by directing the attention of black Christians to ... petty sins – what Biko termed “petty morals” – white theology prevented them from comprehending a larger perspective on sin [i.e.] a system of evil, a structural matrix in which whites lorded themselves above the black majority ... they gave support to apartheid, instead of witnessing and struggling against it (Hopkins 1991:195).

Biko challenged whites' monopoly of power in church leadership through control of resources, decision making, worship and Christian education. Therefore for him the church was irrelevant.

The person of a dogmatised Christ, then, posed a problem for his sceptical mind: his belief in Christ is somewhat pragmatic: “My God – if I have to view Christ as such – is so conservatively interpreted at times that I find him foreign to me” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:239). In order to accept Christ as authentic, Biko had to reject the church and what it stood for, but not Christ himself. For Biko the resolution of this dilemma was Black Theology, because it was a practical theology of hope. “At the heart of ‘Black Theology’ is the perception that Jesus belonged historically in a situation of oppression” (Stubbs 2004:240). The resolution was found in total liberation of body, mind and spirit. Thus the core of his belief about hatred was grounded in the spirit of forgiveness, which aimed at “the liberation not only of the oppressed but also of the oppressor, and presupposes not only that the oppressor can be brought to a state of repentance for what he has done, but also that at that moment he is embraced, and so liberated by the forgiveness extended to him by the oppressed” (Stubbs 2004:242; cf. Volf 1996).

“Whatever his non-belief in the Christ of the historic churches in his style of leadership Steve became an authentic (if unconscious) disciple of Jesus of Nazareth” (Stubbs 2004:218). He had a “quality of compassion ... the suffering with that is the word’s true meaning, the compassion that was the driving force in Christ’s ministry ...” (Stubbs 2004:218).

Biko had an alternative vision of the church in South Africa. Dwight Hopkins (1991) has mapped out its parameters. First, a black God must speak to the black church:

BC tried to present a positive approach to the pain, suffering and anger of black people Black Consciousness – God’s positive will to end apartheid and forge a new humanity – needed to replace white theology and a white God with black theology and the black God in the South African churches (Hopkins 1991:196).

Those formed in God’s image are black, and black is beautiful and shares God’s values and traditions. A black God is political in nature. Black Theology requires a fresh interpretation of Scripture other than crude submission to divinely ordained authority. Rather it is a sin to allow oneself to be oppressed (Biko 1986:31) (cf. Rom 13 with Luke 4:16ff, Rev. 13, Matt. 25:31ff). There was a need for a new biblical hermeneutics from the perspective of poverty and oppression.

Second, we consider the nature of God’s relationship with the creation of a new humanity. God created blacks (Biko 1986:49). Therefore there is an authority higher than white churches, and “to be a black Christian means witnessing so as to fulfil God’s intentional will for black humanity” (Hopkins 1991:198). “[B]lack Christians should live their lives fully and fight to create a new society on earth where they could be a free humanity, foreshadowing the liberated nature of God’s kingdom” (Hopkins 1991:198).

Third, Jesus needs to be radically represented as a “militant fighter who dedicated his life to defending the interests of his ‘father’s temple” (Hopkins 1991:198). Black Theology “seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and his daily problems” (Biko 1986:94).

Fourth, this leads to the existential question: what does it mean to be human? Here the need is to enculturate traditional African religious values into contemporary Christian heritage; to respect the individual-in-community: “... in all we do we always

place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community-oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach" (Biko 1986:42). This entails challenging capitalism as an exploitive economic system.

Finally, the question must be considered: who does theology? It is not a specialist activity. It is worship of God in a comprehensive sense, the work of the people of God (*leitourgia*) emerging from the daily struggle of suffering people. It is a 'popular' as opposed to a specialist activity. BC was an important component of Black Theology. As "black pastors and lay people rub shoulders with it they begin to ask questions and we believe that they are going to find answers themselves" (Mofokeng 1986:123). It was an innovative approach and allowed a move away from the specialisation of the ordained ministry that Biko objected to.

"It is the duty of all black priests and ministers of religion to save Christianity by adopting Black Theology's approach and thereby once more uniting the black man with his God" (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:104). That is to say, "... it seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and his daily problems and does not claim to be a theology of absolutes ... It seeks to bring back God to the black man and to the truth and reality of his situation" (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:104). Biko constantly talks about an "absence of abundant life" (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:122), "a sense of insecurity which is part of a feeling of incompleteness" (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:124) [from the BPC-SASO trial, May 1976].

This God had to be restored to black people, for the missionaries had denied them their God and offered in return the white conception of divinity. Yet Biko claims:

We also believed in one God, we had our own community of saints through whom we related to our God, and we did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship God in isolation from the various aspects of our lives. Hence worship was not a specialised function that found expression once a week in a secluded building, but rather it featured in

our wars, our beer drinking, our dances and our customs in general ... we took it for granted that all people at death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:102-103).

Apart from believing in God as creator and source of wisdom, power and love, Biko conceived of God as the source of human conscience: "God has laid for man certain basic laws that must govern interaction between man and man, man and nature at large. These laws I see as inscribed in the ultimate conscience of each living mortal" (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:236-237). This went beyond human conscience, for a human may "dull his sensitivity to his own conscience and hence become hard, cruel, evil, bad etc. But intrinsically somewhere in him there is always something that tells him he is wrong. This is then his awareness of the unexpressed and unwritten laws that God has laid down to regulate human behaviour" (Biko, in Stubbs 2002:237). To Biko this related to obedience to God (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:241).

Stubbs (2004:240) suggests that Biko found in Black Theology a "paradigm of spiritual praxis in the contemplation and imitation of the black Christ". All this provides a basis for Black Theology (BT).

## 5 BIKO'S THEOLOGY?

Biko was not an academic theologian, that is a specialist, yet he could and did theologise, for he believed it was the Christian's task to think theologically, even if not in a formal sense.

The relationship between BC and BT was that of "soul mates walking together in the ongoing struggle of black liberation" (Goba 1986:3; cf. 1986a:63); "parallel movements both arising from black experience. They both attempt to articulate a way of engaging in a struggle for liberation which takes seriously the existential experience of being oppressed in the South African context" (Goba 1986a:61).

What is clear is that "South African Black Theology drew heavily from Biko's black consciousness philosophy" (Vellem 2007:3). "In its defining moments therefore, it is imperative to grasp the fact that Black Theology harnessed Black Consciousness philosophy to define a particular consciousness that could be used to liberate black masses from their inferiority complex" (Vellem 2007:4).

"Biko himself reflected on theological issues and he was commonly seen among theological students. It is safe to infer that his consciousness and spirituality ... are two sides of the same coin" (Vellem 2007:288-289). The coalescence of BC and BT is clear in Biko's thinking and acting, for he never differentiated between issues of consciousness and theology: "Steve Biko was not a scholar of religion nor was he a trained moral philosopher. What he was reflecting was received wisdom from his community, which afforded him the tools to present a moral critique of the church and of the political system that undermined the inherent dignity of people." Pityana (1991:145) claims that "Biko failed to present a critique of the religion he espoused and did not understand it in its dynamic metanarrative expression. There may be some doubt as to how much of that primal religion one can capture in the modern world." This may well be true, remembering that Biko was neither a trained philosopher nor a theologian; further, he never set out to articulate a definitive theological position. There is a sense in which he had

assimilated a latent form of Anglicanism, from which he could not totally dissociate himself.

But his approach was inclusive. Biko also strategically situated his version of black consciousness philosophy in a humanist framework. From its inception black consciousness philosophy had a humanist emphasis, which allowed the development of a theological counterpart: “Biko asserts that blacks believe in the inherent goodness of man and criticises the missionaries for having scared blacks with their stories of hell” (Morphew 1989:152). Sin is rather sourced in evil social institutions. The black caucus of the University Christian Movement gave birth to Black Theology, the religious complement of black consciousness philosophy. “Black Theology encouraged black South Africans to reinterpret the Christian faith in the light of the specific realities of their situation” (Halisi 1991:103). But it went further, seeking “to do away with spiritual poverty of the black people” and affirms “that Christianity is an adaptable religion that fits in with the cultural situation of the people to whom it is imparted” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:34); it is a human-centred society (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:45) “where all commonly shared ...” (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:46).

Although Biko might be described as a ‘theologian’ from and with the masses of black people, he would have repudiated that title, because it designated a ‘specialist’ – and one of Biko’s main critiques of the church was its ‘specialisation’. He never got bogged down in rigid doctrinal or theological categories or wrote elaborate treatises. He immersed himself in issues pertaining to the very life and death of the community. For him experience of and talk about God arose from practical activities among the suffering victims of apartheid and their movement towards liberation. As he argued: “Black theology ... is a situational interpretation of Christianity. It seeks to relate the present-day black man to God within the given context of the black man’s suffering and his attempts to get out of it” (Biko 1987:59). In short, “Biko began to radically interpret old Christian concepts from the perspective of Black Consciousness” (Hopkins 1991:194).

Consequently we reject Hopkins's (1991:199) assertion that Biko "[h]oned<sup>2</sup> a Black Theology for the liberation movement in South Africa", although he certainly "shed a new perspective on Christian discourse and practice in his native land" (Hopkins 1991:199). But here we must remember that his main religious interlocutors were white male ordained expatriates, that is, the specialists at whom he generally looked askance (David Russell and Aelred Stubbs)! Part of his distinctive contribution to ecclesiology was his ability to discern the difference between false and authentic Christianity: "During his life he called on black religious leaders within the struggle against apartheid to adopt a true understanding of authentic Christianity" (Hopkins 1991:199; cf. Webster 1982:61). This raises a critical question, because some might have argued that they did have such an understanding, although they may have worked with a different hermeneutics from that of the BT paradigm. However, Biko was firm in his commitment: "... not only did the limited presence of Black Theology in the churches retard Christian participation in the movement for justice, but the victory of the entire liberation process hinged on the existence of a black theological faith" (Hopkins 1991:199). Yet is this necessarily true? Was it only those who had been exposed to and engaged in BC and BT who were authentically involved in the struggle against apartheid?

## 6 BIKO AND FEDSEM

Perhaps it is appropriate to begin with Biko's involvement with students in higher education. Biko became a member of the University Christian Movement (UCM), which was formed in 1967 (Kretzschmar 1986:61):

The University Christian Movement is a religious group concerning itself with ecumenical topics and modernisation of the archaic Christian religious

---

<sup>2</sup> To use the term 'honed' implies a sharpening of his theology to a degree of sophistication that was not appropriate to Biko's theological development.



practice. It also concerns itself with a practical application of Christian principles in an immoral society like the South African one (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:15).

It played a significant role in the formation of SASO in 1968. This resulted from Biko's call for a black student organisation:

... there was tremendous response from various campuses in the country. I can remember serving on the SRC of the Federal Theological Seminary and how important the challenge was for us. It was important because it challenged us to focus on our black identity and its relationship to the struggle. One can safely say that the emergence of Black Consciousness in the late sixties represented a kind of a political reawakening in the country (Goba 1986a:62).

This was because there was a dearth of black leadership, major political organisations having been banned. A significant number of black students left UCM (because it was perceived as being too liberal), following the SASO breakaway from NUSAS, "to establish the Black Theology movement which represented a theological response to the challenge of Black Consciousness" (Goba 1986a:62). In 1973 Biko was banned, along with a group of SASO leaders. Subsequently (31 January 1975 - 16 December 1976) he stood trial in what became known as the BPC-SASO Trial, "the Trial of Black Consciousness" (Stubbs 2004:201).

Biko had a particular interest in the training of theology students, for they were "seen as destined to play a collaborative role in the apartheid state and its Bantustans" (Buthelezi 1991:112). However, the other side of the coin was that as potential leaders in the communities they would be called to serve they could be significant interlocutors of a BC and BT perspective. The impact of BCM produced tangible results, evidenced by "the change in traditionally conservative attitudes of black ministers of religion ... five old students of St Peter's

(Anglican) Theological College have been or are currently banned or detained. This would have been unimaginable ten years earlier” (Stubbs 2004:58). This was not confined to St Peter’s students; it was a recurrent feature in Fedsem’s entire history! If we compare it to the Ngangelizwe incident (to be discussed below), we see the involvement of Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Methodist students.

Various theological colleges, including Fedsem, were involved in SASO. Sabelo Ntwasa, a Fedsem student, became the first organiser of the UCM’s Black Theology project. He published the papers read at the first conference in 1972, *Essays in Black Consciousness* (Nel 1994:140-141). Fedsem was one of the venues for Black Theology seminars.

Biko visited Fedsem on numerous occasions, inter alia “to encourage the growth of SASO at Fort Hare and the Seminary” (Stubbs 2004:179). As a racially separate body, SASO seemed to contradict all that Fedsem stood for, namely “a resolute opposition to apartheid in all its manifestations, and positively a Christian witness to non-racial brotherhood and reconciliation” (Stubbs 2004:179). This contrasts with Fort Hare’s positive response, which appeared to conform to apartheid policy. This differential approach even caused confusion among the Fedsem student body (Stubbs 2004:179). Yet SASO grew – even at Fedsem. A white lecturer (Stubbs 2004:211) was actually converted to BC and “welcomed the coming into being of SASO and its ascendancy on the Seminary campus”. St Peter’s College was made available for the SASO formation school in 1972. SASO had a transforming effect on relationships between the black and so-called coloured populations. These were tensions which “had certainly caused tensions at our Alice Seminary – this was not only indicative of new mood in the young Coloured community, but a significant achievement of non-ethnic black solidarity” (Stubbs 2004:220).

In 1968, Biko was invited to speak at Fort Hare UCM. He challenged students to adopt the entire university as their responsibility, that is he challenged *all* staff to see the connection between student responsibility and social concerns (Wilson 1991:24 [emphasis mine]).

A number of related points can be raised regarding Biko's involvement with Fedsem and its relationship with BC and BT. Stubbs (2004:182) recounts an incident in 1971, when he found Biko in the seminary common room "as usual the centre of attention". "In all the main black educational centres of the country Steve had attained an almost messianic status" (Stubbs 2004:184). This may be a somewhat idealised picture, for Biko was not alone in being regarded as a leader: he was one of a number of charismatic students who attracted a following, especially among younger, more impressionable students.

A particular contribution of Fedsem to Black Theology was its production of scholars and teachers of high calibre from its earliest days. They included Simon Gqubule, Desmond Tutu, Siggibo Dwane, Khoza Mgojo, Bonganjalo Goba, Cecil Ngcokovane and Tinyiko Maluleke. It should be noted that these names represent different stages in the development of BT.

Fedsem's emphasis in practical theology on community involvement as well as church/congregational work derived in part from Biko's thinking.

Fedsem provided Biko with a mentor, Fr Aelred Stubbs of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection, St Peter's College (Wilson 1991:20).

A particular instance of Biko's involvement with Fedsem occurred after the expropriation of Fedsem's Alice campus. Within a few days of Fedsem's arrival at Umtata in 1975, Heroes' Day was commemorated on 24 March,<sup>3</sup> when the victims of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre were remembered. Some students arranged a commemorative service in the Bantu Presbyterian Church in the nearby township of Ngangelizwe. They had approached the Rev G T Vika, minister of the congregation, for permission to hold the service. Vika<sup>4</sup> warned the students of the need to be sensitive to the political situation and agreed on the understanding that this was to be an official

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilkinson (1992:318) is wrong in his dating of the incident when he claims it took place after "a couple of months".

<sup>4</sup> A leading member of Matanzima's Transkei National Independence Party, Moderator of the Bantu Presbyterian Church (a founding member church of Fedsem), and chairman of St Columbia's college council.

Seminary service. The Seminary authorities supported the service on the understanding that the Rev Vika knew all about it and the Bantu Presbyterian Church supported it (AB2414 B5.7, CPSA Archives, WCL William Cullen Library, Wits). The service itself was uneventful and conformed to the order of an ordinary church service. Following the service the students distributed a leaflet, published some years earlier by SASO and the BPC, entitled "On the way to Sharpeville". The document was a predominantly historical survey of past events, but it included a trenchant critique of homelands policy. While the Seminary community was oblivious of these events, the Transkeian government had been timeously informed about it.

On 7 April the chief minister made a statement in the house of assembly to the effect that the Fedsem students had come to Umtata "not to learn, but to engender ill feeling between blacks and whites in the Transkei and 'to incite people to change by revolution'" (Daily Dispatch, 9 April 1975). The apparent source of his concern was the SASO/BPC document, but it was an outdated statement. However, it was enough to suggest a 'Leftist' political motive. He said:

I'm satisfied that the meeting held at Ngangelizwe under the guise of religion was nothing else than a political meeting ... It is chiefly as a result of this meeting that these gentlemen have come to Umtata with the specific purpose of disrupting peace and quiet in the Transkei (Daily Dispatch, 9 April 1975).

The students responded that they had no intention of offending the government or inciting a revolt. This may well have been a disingenuous response, for the group of students who had "spearheaded this activism [and] were working very closely with Steve Biko". At the time of the Ngangelizwe incident Biko was under house arrest and could not travel, having been banned along with a group of SASO leaders in 1973. Noting the potential seriousness of this development, however, he broke his banning order and travelled to Umtata to meet the group and strongly criticised the excessively aggressive and provocative

manner in which students had dealt with the police. He felt that their behaviour was unbecoming for student ministers. He urged the group to use methods of protest that were more befitting men of the cloth (Letter, Mdlalose to Duncan, 2 December 2004, personal correspondence).

Mosala (Villa-Vicencio 1993:213) confirms this:

He told us that black consciousness was more important than any of us, arguing that short-term victories needed to be weighed against long-term goals. He demanded that for the sake of the Black Consciousness Movement we were to go back to the campus, and not alienate the others on the campus merely because we thought we were right.

Biko adopted this position despite his negative attitude to homelands (Biko, in Stubbs 2004:88-95). He had once proclaimed: "Down with homelands!" (Biko 1987:66). This became known as the Buntingville incident (Minute 838.c, Special Seminary Council, S4142/22/7/75, 11 June 1975). It must be remembered that the incident took place some time before the BPC-SASO trial, "the Trial of Black Consciousness", from 31 January 1975 to 16 December 1976 (Stubbs 2004:201). Significantly, some of the radical students involved in this incident have become the most conservative ministers in their own denominations.

Discipline for Biko was all important and the manner the students handled this entire incident indicated a serious lack of discipline, which could potentially damage the BCM. The BPC adopted an early church attitude towards discipline: a student who made a statement under interrogation was no longer trusted: "... they [members of BCM] and their colleagues were those who suffered from the consequences of such lapses. One was back in the atmosphere of the early persecuted Church, that mingling of exhilarating communion and rigorous discipline; one deadly sin after baptismal rebirth, and you were out!" (Stubbs 2004:205).

## 7 CONCLUSION

Biko's legacy "infused blacks with a spiritual fibre, a mettle and a fighting spirit. It is the inner soul-force seen to be invincible ..." (Pityana 1991a:255).

BC "brought a new ray of hope, a new commitment to the struggle for liberation. Its impact was not just felt in the various black campuses, but also in the various black seminaries" (Goba 1986a:62).

Certainly Biko's critique of the church is both penetrating and devastating in the light of his philosophy and spirituality. Looking at his legacy, it might be concluded that little of his philosophy has been incorporated into the minds and actions of those who were influenced by him. In apartheid society the church was an outstanding witness to liberation in the fullest sense of the word, although some chose to align themselves firmly with those in power. Even when the South African Council of Churches initiated the Standing for the Truth campaign many church members were vilified for seeking to destabilise the status quo in both church and society. In post-apartheid South African society the church is often considered to lag far behind secular institutions when it comes to transformation. One source of these dichotomous responses is the church's lack of self-criticism; it is often uncritical of society, whereas questioning is one of the basic tenets of the BCM. Perhaps this is not surprising when denominations seem unable to tolerate and integrate critical thinkers very easily, choosing rather to marginalise or eliminate them altogether.

However, the Fedsem spirit was not daunted. In the writer's experience in the late 1980s and early 1990s former Fedsem students, by then ministers in congregations, were collaborating in community projects when it was still difficult for them to do so at an institutional church level. This situation has not changed markedly, and may have deteriorated somewhat. Hence I would conclude that Biko's legacy is as relevant for the church of today as it was thirty to forty years ago.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Biko, S 1987. *I write what I like*. Edited by Aereid Stubbs. London: Heineman.
- Biko, S 1988. *I write what I like*. Edited by Aereid Stubbs. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Biko, S 1988. *I write what I like*. Edited by Aereid Stubbs. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Buthelezi, S 1991. The emergence of Black Consciousness: a historical appraisal, in Pityana, N B et al (eds), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, 111-129. Cape Town: Philip.
- Church of the Province of South Africa (CPSA) Archives, William Cullen Library, University of Witwatersrand.
- Cochrane, J R 1987. *Servants of power: the role of the English-speaking churches in South Africa, 1903-1930*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Daily Dispatch*, 9 April 1975.
- Duncan, G A 2003. *Lovedale coercive agency: power and resistance in mission education*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Fatton, R 1986. *Black Consciousness in South Africa: the dialectics of ideological resistance to white supremacy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fedsem. Minutes of Seminary Council, Howard Pym Africana Library, University of Fort Hare.
- Freire, P 1978. *Pedagogy in process: the letters to Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Seabury.

- Goba, B 1986. The use of Scripture in the Kairos Document. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 56, 61-66.
- Goba, B 1986a. The black consciousness movement: its impact on Black Theology, in Mosala, I J & Tlhagale, B (eds), *The unquestionable right to be free: essays in Black theology*, 57-70. Johannesburg: Scotaville.
- Halisi, C R D 1991. Biko and Black Consciousness philosophy: an interpretation, in Pityana, N B et al (eds) *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Bika and Black Consciousness*, 100-110. Cape Town: Philip.
- Hopkins, D 1991. Steve Biko, Black Consciousness and Black Theology, in Pityana, N B et al (eds), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Bika and Black Consciousness*, 194-200. Cape Town: Philip.
- Kretschmar, L 1986. *The voice of Black Theology in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Maphai, V T 1994. The role of Black Consciousness in the liberation struggle, in Liebenberg, I et al (eds), *The long march: the story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa*, 125-137. Pretoria: HAUM.
- Mofokeng, T 1986. The evolution of the black struggle and the role of black theology, in Mosala, I J & Tlhagale, B (eds), *The unquestionable right to be free: essays in Black theology*, 113-128. Johannesburg: Scotaville.
- Moodley, K 1991. The continued impact of Black Consciousness, in Pityana, N B et al (eds.), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Bika and Black Consciousness*, 143-153. Cape Town: Philip.
- Morphew, D J 1989. *South Africa: the powers behind*. Cape Town: Struik.



- Nel, F B O 1994. The story of black theology of liberation in South Africa, in Liebenberg, I et al (eds.), *The long march: the story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa*, 138-148. Pretoria: HAUM.
- Pityana, N B 1991. The legacy of Steve Biko, in Pityana, N B et al (eds), *Bounds of possibility: The legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, 254-256. Cape Town: Philip.
- Pityana, N B 1999. The renewal of African values, in Makgoba, M W (ed), *African Renaissance*, 137-148. Cape Town: Mafube.
- Ramphela, M 1991. Empowerment and symbols of hope: Black Consciousness and community development, in Pityana, N B et al (eds), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, 154-178. Cape Town: Philip.
- Ramphela, M 1995. *A life*. Cape Town: Philip.
- Sibisi, C D T 1991. The psychology of liberation, in Pityana, N B et al (eds.), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, 130-136. Cape Town: Philip.
- Stubbs A 2004. Martyr of hope: a personal memoir, in Stubbs, A (ed.), *I write what I like: a selection of his writings – Steve Biko 1946-1977*, 175-244. Johannesburg: Picador Africa.
- Tutu, D M 1994. *The rainbow people of God*. London: Doubleday.
- Tutu, D M 2004. Preface, in Stubbs, A (ed.), *I write what I like: a selection of his writings – Steve Biko 1946-1977*, ix-x. Johannesburg: Picador Africa.

- Vellem, V S 2007. The symbol of liberation in South African public life: a black theological perspective. Unpublished PhD thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Villa-Vicencio, C 1993. *The spirit of hope: conversations on politics, religion and values*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Volf, M 1996. *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Webster, J (ed.) 1982. *Bishop Desmond Tutu: the voice of one crying in the wilderness*. London: Mowbray.
- Wilkinson, A 1992. *The Community of the Resurrection: a centenary history*. London: SCM.
- Wilson, L 1991. Bantu Stephen Biko: a life, in Pityana et al (eds.), *Bounds of possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, 15-77. Cape Town: Philip.
- Woods D 1987. *Biko*. New York: Holt.

