

# Learning from Black Theology

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Chancellor, Professor Gerwel, Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Badat, Deputy Vice Chancellors Drs Clayton and Mabizela, Councillors and members of the University Senate, I want to take this opportunity to express my delight and heartfelt thanks for the honour the University community has bestowed on me to day. I also want to offer my congratulations to the graduands, who are joining the alumni of this renowned university.

I wish to use this occasion to reflect on Black Theology, now 41 years from its emergence as an overt, self-conscious and radically new theology in South Africa. I choose to do this because I was intimately involved with the emergence of Black Theology in South Africa and secondly because of its link to your Vice Chancellor's passionate recognition of the part played by black university students in the struggle for liberation in his recent history of SASO. Here I recount something of the story of a different group of black students and the ideas that informed their struggle.

Black Theology is now a spent force but nevertheless I believe it has lessons for us all. I offer now my story which I have entitled 'Learning from Black Theology'.

Black Theology will forever be associated with the University Christian Movement (UCM) which formed in 1967 in opposition to the long established Student Christian Association (SCA)

I remind you that in Apartheid South Africa the SCA was for white English-speaking Protestant students. There was a separate organisation for white Afrikaans-speaking students and also distinct organisations for those labelled 'non-white'- black, coloured and Indian students. When the World Students Christian Federation demanded an end to this racist structuring, the SCA refused preferring to disaffiliate from the world body. At this time I was Methodist Chaplain to Rhodes and in concert with Fr. Colin Collins, the national Catholic Chaplain and Fr. John Davies, the national Anglican Chaplain, we proposed a new student Christian body which would be both non-racial and radically ecumenical by including both Catholics and Protestants. We submitted our ideas to our parent church bodies in 1966 and they agreed to sponsor the new body which we called the University Christian Movement (UCM). Its inaugural conference was held in July 1967 at the Anglican-run teacher training college here in Grahamstown with about 90 students attending. Over the next 2 years 30 branches were established in universities seminaries and training colleges. The government at this time banned the student wings of all the black political parties, so black students joined up with the UCM as virtually the only place they could meet, making it almost overnight a black majority body.

At this time on the other side of the world it also happened that a student Christian body, also called the University Christian Movement had been formed in the USA. They invited our fledgling UCM to send three members to their conference in Cleveland Ohio in December of 1967. I was chosen as one of the three to attend. One of the others was, as we were to discover later, an undercover security branch policeman. The third member, Bob Kgwane, was murdered (by driving a bicycle spoke through his heart) by unknown assailants (but presumably the security police) very shortly after our return.

In America we met black Americans who were deeply involved in the Black Power Movement and who were subjecting the Civil Rights Movement and its political strategies to powerful criticism. Here we were also able to get hold of some of the early writings of the influential American black theologian, James Cone, notably *Black Theology and Black Power* and later to

meet Cone himself. These encounters had a lasting impact on me and I was persuaded of the validity of Cone's theology.

Back in South Africa in 1968 at the second national conference of the UCM held at Stutterheim, one of the historically most important events was the holding of a black caucus initiated by Steve Biko. From this came the decision to form a body where black students could meet to discuss issues directly relevant to their personal and living experiences. This led to the formation of the South African Student Organisation (SASO) shortly after.

While this piece of historical curiosity locates the birth of Black Theology within the institutional context of the UCM, it doesn't answer the question of how and why it emerged there in 1970 since SASO, the parent body of the Black Consciousness Movement with which Black theology was undisputedly associated in its beginnings had been up and running vigorously since late 1968. The formation and rapid growth of SASO raised difficult questions about the relations between it and the UCM. Many of the founding members of SASO like Steve Biko (also an executive member of the UCM) and Barney Pityana were Christians who wanted to maintain their involvement with the UCM. They recognised that SASO was not and could not become a Christian organisation. So SASO, committed as it was to the development of Black Consciousness ideology was recognised as the coordinating agency for black student politics. What the Christian members demanded of the UCM was the development of a theological counter-point to Black Consciousness which would address the issue of black liberation. The demand became more strident in 1970 as black students became increasingly scornful of UCM's engagement in humanistic 'encounter groups' and the like, which reflected a liberal reconciliation mind-set.

As a trained theologian now under the influence of James Cone I wrote an exploratory study paper called 'Towards a Black Theology' in 1970. This paper was distributed to all members, affiliates and the sponsoring churches. The immediate and tangible effect was that the UCM established a Black Theology Project and appointed Sabelo Ntwasa as its full-time organiser. Out of this came a sequence of conferences on Black Theology across the country during 1971, with the publication at the end of the year of a selection of conference papers. The publication was immediately banned by the South African government. In the following year, however, the collection was published by the London publisher Christopher Hurst, under the title *Black Theology the South African Voice*.

Black theology took its understanding of 'black' from the Black Consciousness movement, which used 'black' as a positive identifier opposed to the negative term 'non-white'. Thus 'black' referred to all the victims of racism collectively (that is, it included 'Coloured' and 'Indians'). But 'black' had much stronger political force as well. It was not simply about pigmentation but more importantly about attitudes of mind. So 'black' referred specifically to those victims of racism who were engaged personally and directly in the liberation struggle. 'Black', if you like referred exclusively to black freedom fighters. Thus Black Theology had to grow out of and be part of the liberation struggle.

What was most distinctive about Black Theology was its theological method. In essence this was grounded in the conviction that in a racist society, racism not only structures the experiences of the oppressors and their victims differently, it also makes them 'see' and interpret things differently. As such the nature and meaning of Gospel is understood differently when it is approached within the experiential context of white oppressors from what it is when black experiences and aspirations inform the interpretation. Thus whites are likely to see the heart of the Gospel as being about salvation of the soul. Whereas for blacks the primary message is that Jesus came to set the oppressed free. It is about liberation. Thus Black Theology is about black people interpreting the Gospel in the light of black experiences as well as interpreting black experiences in the light of the Gospel. What was central to black

experience in South Africa was their systematic racist oppression and interpreting the Gospel called for an answer to how the Scriptures address this reality of oppression. The answer advocated by the black theologians was that the Gospel was a message of liberation of the oppressed. This had to be understood as an authentic Christian response to oppression.

It is useful to reflect a little on some of the core issues addressed by Black theology as were reported in the banned collection of papers which I had edited and then published as 'Black theology; the South African Voice'.

One was an attack on authoritarianism in all its social formations including religion. The essence of the argument by Mokgethi Motlabi was that to allow others to rule over us and make decisions for us compromises our dignity and authenticity as human beings. This argument was carried over into an attack on the authoritarian images of God (omnipotent, king, ruler, Lord, etc.). We are supposed to obey the will of these authoritarian figures. Authoritarian images of God, which were seen as locking human beings into a permanent childhood and legitimating the social manifestations of authoritarianism in both church and state. Throughout the UCM and thus also in early Black Theology there was a relentless quest to find ways, especially theological ways of affirming human beings as adults. It was argued by Sabelo Ntwasa that we need to explore relational images of God rather than remain locked in the traditional person images. In scriptures there are, he argued, 2 sets of images of God. One is a set of 'person' images, like King, Lord, Father etc. The other is a set of relational images which assert that God is love, peace, justice, etc. Traditional theology takes the 'person' images literally and the relational images as expanding on the person images so that 'God is justice' needs to be understood as One who acts justly. Ntwasa argued that we need to take literally the relational images of God that God is love, peace and justice. So that in Ntwasa's thinking, as he said 'where I see justice at work in the world, there I see God. That act of justice is itself what I mean by God. God is not something extra over and above the real-world manifestations of love and justice'. If we persist in giving priority to the 'person' images we end up with authoritarian ideas about God, such as King, Lord, etc. and thus legitimate authoritarianism in Church and state. We also end up subjecting God to the Race Classification Act according to which God is undisputedly 'White'

A second major issue arose from the character of the UCM as a radically ecumenical movement including Protestants and Catholics. Having Protestants and Catholics together at conferences and in local branches raised serious practical questions about how they could worship together. The response of the UCM was to develop occasion-specific liturgies. These liturgies had a number of fairly consistent characteristics. They were modelled on relational images of God and human beings. They used dance and drama extensively. They drew for their music and songs on the protest song traditions of Europe, the USA and South African black workers, black townships and black universities. There was, thus, an unmistakable political thrust to these occasions of worship, which carried over into the infant Black Theology Movement. In the liturgies and papers of the Black Theology conferences the felt need was to translate into forms of worship the understanding of 'black' as those involved in the liberation struggle. Thus there was experimentation with liturgies which set worship in the context of the black liberation struggle to promote that struggle by celebrating it, by firing the will to resistance, by supporting people in the struggle and by exploring resistance strategies. Specifically they used traditional African 'praise songs' to celebrate leaders of the liberation struggle, like Nelson Mandela. During the 1971 Black Theology conferences it was these acts of struggle-based worship which were most consistently broken up by the security police. I know of no copies of those liturgies which survived the police raids.

A third major issue was feminism. Feminist issues had become dominant across most of the white women members among the branches on white campuses and in regional seminars. This emergence of feminism led to the formation of a women's caucus at the 1968 UCM conference in Stutterheim, out of which grew a national women's project, which focused on exploring the issue of the oppression of women. This development had 2 important effects. One effect was the presence of a lively women's project which attracted a significant number of radical women into the UCM many of whom argued that Christianity had always played a significant role in the marginalisation and oppression of women. The attacks on Christianity as inalienably sexist led many of the sponsoring churches to have doubts about the Christian character of the UCM and to withdraw sponsorship and funding. This put pressure on the UCM to search for the possibility of a feminist theology which resulted in the dissemination of my study paper, 'Towards a Theology of Sexual Politics' in late 1970. This paper even more urgently attacked the "Person" and "Person in Authority" images of God in traditional theology and argued the need for inclusive relational images. This was because if you insist on using 'person' images you will inevitably end up giving God a gender, invariably a male gender and thus legitimising the subordination of women. Thus strong theological links were forged between this emerging feminist theology and Black Theology. The links, however, went deeper than this.

As is well known, and as already mentioned the 1968 UCM Conference at Stutterheim also saw the emergence of a black caucus out of which SASO was born. This placed black women students in a practical dilemma of whether to participate in the women's or the black caucus. This generated heated debate on the priority of women's liberation or black liberation struggles. In essence the arguments boiled down to claims by those who gave priority to the women's struggle that black liberation would be no liberation for black women if it left sexism intact and to counter-claims by those who gave priority to the black struggle that to focus on the women's struggle would be divisive. Since the women's and the black caucuses and the Women's and Black Theology projects became permanent features of the UCM the arguments became ongoing throughout its life.

This feminist strand within the UCM and the challenges it posed for black women had significant consequences for the emergent Black Theology movement. All but one of the Black Theology Conferences had papers addressing this issue by such significant black women speakers as Winifred Kgwere, mother of the murdered Bob Kgwere, and Ellen Kuzwayo. Sadly none of these women would consent to the publication of their papers since sexism in the Church saw that they had no formal training in theology and they recognised that their insights would be dismissed because of it. However, for as long as Black Theology remained within the context of the UCM the issue of feminism remained on the theological agenda.

When the UCM disbanded in 1974, it handed the Black Theology project over to SASO

In 1992, on a visit to South Africa, I undertook a small research project interviewing over 60 people who had been engaged in the Black Theology movement to gauge its significance for the liberation struggle and for their own work. Transcripts of recordings were published as an occasional paper by the University of South Australia in 1993 under the title 'Lord, help Thou our Outrage: Black Theology Revisited'. I quote here from only 2 of them, whose words I think have direct relevance to us here today.

I begin with Frank Chikane, then Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He had this to say:

*I see myself as a black theologian. You can't have learned your theology and your practical politics together like I have and not be a black theologian at heart. Black Theology has always provided me with the tools to reflect on and to direct my practical struggles. And these struggles*

*have always been with other black people for liberation. That, for me, is the most fundamental characteristic of Black Theology. The black theologians are political activists who reflect on their praxis. If you theologise without involvement, the people will see through you. The struggle of black people against oppression and for freedom; that is what black theology is about. (in Moore, 1993)*

Frank Chikane again argued that Black Theology is a theology which advances the struggle by empowering people. In his words;

*The yardstick by which I judge any theology and thus Black Theology, is whether it advances the struggle of the people. And it does this by empowering people; by providing them with the spiritual and emotional resources to engage in the struggle. For me black consciousness and Black Theology was a conversion experience. It unleashed in me energies and commitments I never knew were there. It enabled me to engage in political action as a Christian in a way that I would never have believed possible with my conservative Pentecostal background. It brought me into the struggle.*

It can be seen that what Black Theology did at that historical point in time was to enable black clergy and black Christians to engage in the political struggle for liberation as Christians. This as we know, Frank Chikane likened to a conversion experience. Traditionally black Christians had seen their faith as lying outside the political arena. Black Theology located their faith in the very heart of the struggle for liberation. What Black Theology did was engage black Christian students in the liberation struggle.

Black Theology was intimately associated with the Black Consciousness movement. But as leading Christian activists moved into the ANC they ceased to call themselves Black theologians even though Mcebisi Xundu claims that:

*Every black Christian who today is directly engaged in the struggle as a Christian is a product of black theology. Of course, there were black Christians who did engage in the struggle before black theology. They did so, however, without being able to hold their political activism and their Christian commitment together. And they were roundly condemned in their churches for being political activists. Today we act as Christian political activists holding it all together and even our church leaders are out there on the streets with us. I don't think that the young people of today who have not had to live in a South Africa without black theology will ever appreciate how draining that schizophrenia was for us. As we moved to engage the system we always had to do battle with our churches who told us this was against the will of God. (in Moore, 1993)*

It is time to reflect in closing on the timeless and lasting significance of Black Theology and to ask what we can learn from it as a new generation of young intellectuals. Firstly I want to reflect on its significance for the business of doing theology. As we saw Frank Chikane claim, 'the yardstick by which I judge any theology is whether it advances the struggle of people. And it does this by empowering people by providing them with the spiritual and emotional resources to engage in the struggle'. Even though I no longer see myself as a theologian, I have the temerity to say that I heartily concur with that analysis of what constitutes authentic theology. In today's South Africa, however, 'race' is no longer the primary social and political cleavage. As your Vice Chancellor has said in his conclusion to his study of SASO,

*"During the past 15 years of democracy there have been important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival" (Saleem Badat, 2009).*

Today's struggle in South Africa is no longer for liberation from the systematic structures of the racist oppression of Apartheid. The arena has shifted to those who suffer the ravages of poverty. The struggle has to be for social justice and thus a more equal society. For me, this means that authentic theology has to listen to the experiences and aspirations of those suffering human beings and, like black theologians of 40 years ago, today's theologians have to be engaged with these victims of oppression in their struggle for liberation and give voice to their cries. They have to empower them spiritually and emotionally to engage in their struggle and they have themselves to be involved in their struggle. The authentic theologian is still one engaged in that struggle as a political activist.

Graduands, I know that you are not theologians and some of you may not be Christians, but in conclusion I would admonish you in similar vein. Our task as intellectuals is still to engage with the victims of injustice, to analyse their plight, to give voice to their distress and their hopes. But it is not to do this standing aloof from their struggle. It needs to be done from the very heart of that struggle. It is to devise and implement strategies that will restore to people their dignity and humanity. Each of you in your own chosen field is being called upon to become liberation activists for social justice. This is a tough commission requiring courage, great skill and determination. I am sure, however, that your experience here at Rhodes has inspired and skilled you for this vocation. This is what makes it a great university.

Thank you, once again, members of the Rhodes community for the honour you have done me today, but even more thank you Rhodes for your contribution to my own growth and the values you have instilled in me.

## **Sources**

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