

Black theology as public discourse

by

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Introduction

This is a black American's perspective on black theology in South Africa. Therefore, as a concept paper, it does not pretend to be decisive. Clearly those black theologians "on the ground" are best situated to sort through the topic under discussion. Hence, I write to raise questions about the consistency of black theology based on its own stated and intended goals. I do, however, recognize that, in common wisdom, it is one thing to throw stones outside the castle's walls. It is another thing to run the castle once the former opposition is now the occupier.

Black theology in South Africa began between the end of 1969 and during the year 1970. From its inception, it perceived its role as taking a faithful witness to Jesus Christ's call for the liberation of the least in society into the public arena of apartheid South Africa and beyond into a new "liberated" South Africa. Thus black theology, by its own admission, began as "public discourse." Now that it occupies part of the "castle", I suggest that it needs to revisit some of its former theological planks, take stock of their plausibility and applicability today, and fine tune them into credible public policy debates. What follows is an underscoring of a few claims of South African black theology.

Politics

Historically, South African black theology argued for both a political and cultural liberation thrust to the Christian Gospel. Because, in the political theological view, God had granted the earth to all of God's "children", then the land (and the resources in the land) belonged to all in South Africa. Hence, black theology has always argued for a reclamation of the land for the black majority population. This political vector signified the political right of the black majority to receive and act as stewards of God's gift to humanity. Not only did the political right to self-determination flow from God's creation of all the earth and gift to the majority as caretakers, the right of self-determination resulted, moreover, from black theology's notion of sacredness due to the presence of ancestors buried long ago. The land issue proved key, in the political thrust of black theology, because the entire structure of the former apartheid system and the new projected "liberated" South Africa stood or fell based on who had the political majority to control the economics of the country. Thus, based on a view of God and the ancestors as it translated into the political right of self-determination, black theology linked its notion of democratization of the political reigns of power closely with a democratization of the economic pillars of society. Restated, black theology called for a political programme of one-person, one-vote and hinted at a similar prescription for citizens' relation to the land, the resources in and on the land and the industries and technology required to work the land.

Culture

The cultural push in black theology spoke more to the psycho-cultural and indigenous values of the black majority. Specifically, it fought for the rebuilding of black self-confidence and self-esteem, damaged by years of apartheid's white superiority rule. Black theology felt that this cultural accent would be necessary even in the new "liberated" South Africa. The hinge of this cultural concern resulted from a distinct theological analysis. All black South Africans were created in the image of God; therefore they were called to affirm their "blackness" because it reflected God's image. Psychologically, white rule normalized "white" culture as standard. Consequently, blacks suffered from an estrangement from their created *imago dei*. To be full participants in the political and economic realms of the public, black theology asserted the necessity of reclaiming the black self affirmed by God. In addition to the *imago dei* rationale, black theology claimed that one had to take one's full "African" or "black" self into the public sphere because, from an indigenous African vantage, there was no separation of religio-cultural sensibilities from the area of the public or even public policy. Structurally, therefore, indigenous "African" values were to be structured in the system of the new "liberated" South Africa. One found this cultural move reflected in a popular Black Consciousness adage of the late 1960s and early 1970s: "black man, you are on your own."

Moreover, black theology advanced the argument of communalism, based, in its opinion, on African indigenous religio-cultural values. As a sacred value, black theology stated that this tradition of the "ancestors" was still relevant and applicable to the modern (or post-modern?) era. Logically, this ethical value would undergird the macro arenas of politics and economics as well. Linked closely to communalism, perhaps as one way of implementing it, were the efforts to build grassroots self-reliance in a communal fashion. Specifically, black theology participated in local self-reliant efforts. In these instances, black students, professionals, and skilled persons worked with the unlettered folk to improve the well being of local communities on micro levels; for example, in the areas of literacy, health, community centers, and physical projects in the rural areas.

Theology

Finally, black theology arose as a response to a dilemma grounded in a profound existential, spiritual, and theological schizophrenia. On the one hand, black clergy had been trained in the theology of the west (e.g., Europe and the U.S.A.) Similarly, worship and liturgy of many churches reflected the style and flow of the white missionary churches. But, on the other hand, the reality of African indigenous religions and culture had not been rooted out by Christianity. And, moreover, the vast majority of the black population were well connected (either by memory, practice or both) to African indigenous worldviews, rituals, faith, and practices. In a very real sense, black theology arose to answer the question posed by this schizophrenia: how could one be both Christian and black (or African)? The response was the emergence of black theology — the gospel was grounded in the black poor who were the majority. Hence, black theology saw itself as a prophetic endeavor in the public realm.

Summation

Black theology, no doubt, will have to modify some, if not most (?), of its original claims in the public of the new South Africa. However, I would argue that it is still a good conceptual exercise to revisit its own foundational assertions and measure them with where black theology is today. In that light and from my read of its historical agenda, black theology has the following, inter alia, areas of public debate and public policy in which to engage. These summary questions and issues flow from a theological motivation. Politically, how should liberation from physical oppression take place? What further refinement or new configuration would black theology bring to the one-person, one-vote franchise? And what does it look like, in practice, to have a reorganization of the economic sphere and land? Culturally, how does one

introduce and structure into the public issues of psychological liberation and African indigenous cultural values? What is specifically unique and particularly valuable from the black South African tradition and reality that it needs to add to the public discourse? Finally, based on black theology's stance in support of the majority population of poor black people, as the Gospel mandate, where do African Independent Churches and African indigenous religions fit in?

Clearly the plate is full for all who occupy "the castle" of the new, democratic South Africa today. My essay is merely one of remembering, clarification, and theological stimulation in and for the public.

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