

BLACK THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION

M G B Motlhabi
University of South Africa

Abstract

A few years ago black theologians in the United States celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of James Cone's first book, *Black theology and black power*. Cone's book represented the first systematic reflection on the germinating subject of black theology at the time and it stimulated further reflection and debate by others. Such theological activity took place not only in the United States, but also in other parts of the world. One of the foremost countries that were inspired by Cone's method of black theology was South Africa. It is thus fitting that as African American theologians found cause to celebrate their thirtieth anniversary not long ago, we as South Africans should also take time to reflect briefly on our own participation in the earlier debate. This paper reflects only one person's view of developments in this country, however, and does not claim to represent the whole South African perspective.

1 ORIGINAL PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

Black theology in South Africa followed closely on the heels of American black theology and is closely related to it. The two theologies are soul-mates, to use a term applied in a different but related context. The term 'black theology' itself antedates its formal content and was a consequence of the black power movement in the United States of America in the 1960s. It was only after it was given content by James Cone, one of its earliest exponents, that black theology reached our shores and gained its appeal and prominence in South Africa. The origin and history of this term has been sufficiently explained by Cone and Wilmore (1999), two of the leading founding fathers of black theology as an intellectual discipline in America.

What Cone wrote about the African American situation and how black theology interpreted it was not far removed from our own situation

under white domination in South Africa. It was as if he was speaking directly to our situation, and black theologians here identified immediately with his analysis and theological interpretation. By the 1970s black theology reflection was in full swing in the rest of this country, by means of seminars and workshops conducted by the Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement (UCM).

Shortly after its emergence in the country other black organisations were also to adopt the spirit and approach of black theology and to include it in their conference programmes. Among these were organisations such as the South African Students Organization (SASO) – which subscribed to the philosophy of black consciousness – the Black Community Programmes (BCP), the Interdenominational African Ministers Association of South Africa (IDAMASA), and the African Independent Churches Association (AICA). Although most of these organisations were older than SASO, none of them escaped the influence of both black consciousness and black theology under the leaderships of SASO and UCM.

In 1972 a national theological conference was held at Mapumulo, Kwa-Zulu Natal, with the chief aim of exploring the relevance and significance of African theology and black theology in South Africa, specifically, and in Africa as a whole. Interestingly enough, although black theology was obviously the chief focus and concern of the conference, the theme of the conference was not black theology as such but: 'Towards a relevant theology for Africa' (see Becken 1973). Both African theology and black theology were scrutinised to determine the contributions they could make to formulate a theology considered relevant to Africa. The same year saw the banning of leading advocates of black consciousness and black theology in the country, including student leaders Steve Biko and Barney Pitso. Among those banned were also two staff members of UCM's Black Theology Project, Basil Moore – a white Methodist minister holding a PhD from Rhodes University – and Sabelo Ntwasa – a final-year theology student for the Anglican Church ministry. A subsequent banning order also included UCM's general secretary, Madibeng Mokolitoa. Basil Moore had been the first director of the Black Theology Project, a position which he held for a short time before handing over to Ntwasa. With both of them now under a banning order,¹ a search was instituted for Ntwasa's replacement and successor, while an acting director continued the administration of the project.

It soon became clear, however, that the UCM could no longer be a permanent home for the Black Theology Project. Its other projects included the Women's Liberation Project and the White Theology Project, which were also destined to seek a new home. Not only were two of its leaders banned but also, together with the Christian Institute

and the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, the UCM was to be under investigation by a government-appointed commission – known as the Schlebusch Commission – on suspicion of ‘furthering the aims of Communism’. At that time, any organisation, which held views which challenged government policy and advocated black liberation were labelled communistic by the government. If found guilty, each of these organisations would be declared an ‘affected organisation’. This would make it almost impossible for them to function or raise funds for their operations.

Since there was no hope that it would survive the obviously predetermined judgment of the commission, the leaders of the UCM decided on its dissolution, thus forcing the Black Theology Project to search for a new home. Accordingly, the UCM worked together with SASO and the BCP, with the cooperation of AICA and IDAMASA, towards the establishment of an autonomous Black Theology Agency to continue the work of the Black Theology Project. While such an agency was subsequently established at a conference gathered for this specific purpose, it did not, however, survive this founding stage. Both unavailability of qualified leadership and financial backing made it impossible for it to function and simply faded away.

2 LEARNING ABOUT BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND BLACK THEOLOGY

I personally came to the UCM and its Black Theology Project quite accidentally during the second year of the project's short existence. Before this, I had been a student for the Catholic priesthood at Hammanskraal, Pretoria, where I had completed my fifth of a seven-year study programme. While at Hammanskraal, I clearly recall two significant visits by student leaders who were associated with black consciousness and black theology, visits which were to determine my interest in both movements. Indeed, these visits were to determine the course of my theological vocation shortly thereafter.

One of the visits was by the student leaders Steve Biko and Barney Pityana.ⁱⁱ They had come to preach black consciousness and to win seminarian converts for SASO. After an address by them to the student body, I remember being part of a group of students who dismissed them casually as having succumbed to the trap of apartheid racism and so were preaching a gospel of racial separation. Paradoxically, I was actually shocked that they could speak as critically as they did about racism and injustice in an environment which at the time was fraught with government spies and informers. Because of these ‘sell-outs’, as government spies later came to be referred to in SASO, the

government had succeeded in keeping black people in line by filling them with the fear of being caught on the wrong side of the law through any kind of criticism against its evil policies. At that time no one could be trusted, even among blacks themselves, and the consequences of being caught speaking against the government were only too well known.

Within a short space of time after the visit of Biko and Pityana, came Sabelo Ntwasa with his equally 'racist' black theology! He told us about white racism and its oppressive white theology, as well as about the need to counter these evils with a radical black theology. Sabelo was quite an outspoken seminarian, who did not even hesitate to point a finger at our white clergy lecturers and accuse them of misleading us with their pie-in-the-sky theology. At one time, when I had already joined the black theology staff under UCM, he was confronted by a white woman for having used the 'Whites only' toilets in the building where the UCM offices were housed. Sabelo stretched out toward the woman, pointed his long finger toward his chest and beat it several times as he uttered the words: "In my father's house, there are many toilets!" Back at the seminary, though, still relatively innocent as we were politically, some of us also dismissed his message, as we did Biko's and Pityana's, on the grounds that theology had no colour. I must admit that up to then I had not been aware of any sign of racism in our lecturers, both at minor and major seminaries. Nor can I, even now, think of any action on the part of any one of them which could have been construed as racist.

As Catholics at the time we considered our church to be, like the Church of the Province of South Africa, one of the most open and liberal socially, though not necessarily doctrinally. It was thus with much surprise and disbelief that I later read De Gruchy's (1979) unfavourable account of the place of the Catholic Church in this country's struggle against apartheid. Be that as it may, I was later to discover racism-proper in the church – not at the seminary itself – but in the actual functioning of the church outside the seminary walls. Before then, though, little did I imagine that I would later be a colleague of the son of man' – as Sabelo Ntwasa piously called himself – in the Black Theology Project of the UCM.

3 'ROAD TO DAMASCUS'

Realising that it was necessary for me to understand the ideas behind both black consciousness and black theology if I were to be able to challenge them effectively, as I thought they had to be, I decided to start reading the material which had been left behind after both the Biko/Pityana and the Ntwasa visits. This material consisted of some of

the old SASO newsletters and some material from the Black Theology Project. Far from gaining ammunition for my intended refutation exercise, however, I found myself disarmed during my reading and agreeing with almost everything I read. Thus, willy-nilly, I became a convert to the cause of black consciousness and its related spiritual counterpart, black theology. In the popular language of the time, I was 'conscientised'.

I was soon to attend an annual conference of SASO in the same year (1971) in Durban, where I was further nurtured and my eyes further opened. Not too long before this I had attended a conference of Intersem (Interseminary Seminar) at St Peter's Seminary, Hammanskraal, which I had found to be quite stimulating. I realised little then that I was perhaps fascinated more by being in the company of so many white seminarians at the same time, an experience which was quite new to me in our segregated society and its separate (but not equal!) institutions. There were, of course, only a few black faces at this conference, which was understandably dominated by white seminary students.ⁱⁱⁱ

Not so at the SASO General Students Council (GSC) several months later. The SASO conference was an all black affair and it was an angry affair. Black students were naming the sins of white racism and apartheid – telling it like it is, as it were – and refusing any longer to be at the receiving end of white hatred. They rejected white leadership, dissociated themselves from any form of cooperation with white liberals, their student organisations and their institutions. It was at this conference that SASO withdrew its affiliation to the predominantly white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and adopted the slogan, 'Black man, you are on your own'.^{iv} UCM was still considered an exception among white-dominated organisations at the time, perhaps because it was still new and considered to be – as Itumeleng Mosala would say – a liberated zone.

Here I heard the radical views of African political leaders and philosophers quoted, figures such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Leopoldt Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Sekou Toure, Franz Fanon, among others. I also heard for the first time about Malcolm X, largely considered to be Martin Luther King's counterpart in the civil rights struggle in the United States.^v For SASO at the time, Malcolm X was the favourite model because of his original uncompromising anger and blunt analysis of American racism. King's non-violent approach of love and turning the other cheek was found to be too soft and to encourage submissiveness. Because of this assessment of the two African American leaders, I took quite a while before I could reconcile myself to learning more about King's point of view and appreciating it.

With the kind of baptism of fire which I received at this conference, things were no longer to be the same again for me.

One other influence I received within the same year – everything seemed to be happening in that year – came from the Catholic Church itself. It came from a group of non-religious black priests,^{vi} all of whom had done their seminary training at St Peter's Major Seminary and hence called themselves the St Peter's Old Boys Association (SPOBA). Perhaps the most prominent among them and one who was to be a strong advocate of black theology was Dr Mongameli Mabona. He had a Doctor of Canon Law degree from Rome, one of a few blacks in this country to have reached that level of theological education at the time. The only other one I soon came to know was a Lutheran seminary lecturer, Dr Manas Buthelezi, who was to be the leading spokesperson for black theology in the coming years.^{vii}

SPOBA published an article in a newspaper titled, 'Our church has let us down'. It was an account of racism in the church and the unfair treatment of blacks, even at clerical and religious levels. This kind of public exposure of the Catholic Church and its internal politics had never been heard of before in this country. Hence it was as shocking and disillusioning as it aroused indignation against the church among many blacks. As a result of all these influences I gradually developed a questioning and critical attitude toward the church from then on and implicitly became a rebel.

I must admit that there were also other influences in my seminary days which had a formative influence on my theological and political views. These were from neither the black consciousness nor the black theology movements, nor were they from any other black source in the country. On my way to the SASO conference referred to above, for instance, I had the opportunity – together with a few other students from the seminary – to attend another conference at the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, near Johannesburg. This was a progressive church centre run by an Anglican priest, the Reverend Fr Dale St John White, and situated next to St Ansgar's Mission, the centre of the first black theology seminar and of many other early seminars on the subject. The theme of the conference was 'The missionary structure of the congregation'. One of the speakers at this conference was German theologian Ebehard Bethge, a famous Bonhoeffer scholar and Bonhoeffer's life-time friend. A novice in the field as I was, I knew of neither of the two theologians at this time and so the name Bethge did not mean anything to me.

Bethge gave a talk on Bonhoeffer's *Letters and papers from prison*, which I found quite challenging and liberating, theologically. Other developments and proceedings at this conference, about which I

remember very little now, turned me around and left me standing on the top of my head! At seminary I had developed a fanatical habit of distinguishing among my theological readings. Staunch Catholic that I was I had adopted – on my own – the practice of reading only material or books which had an *Imprimatur* or "*Nihil obstat*"^{viii} stamp. By the time I returned to the seminary after the Wilgespruit conference I adopted the opposite approach of deliberately avoiding such books and looking specifically for books written by Protestant authors. I naturally started by looking for *Letters and papers from prison* at the seminary library. Among the other writings I discovered were by names such as Joseph Fletcher (*Situation ethics: The new morality and the ensuing Situation ethics debate*), John Robinson (*Honest to God*), Harvey Cox (*The secular city*), Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton (*Radical theology and the death of God*, followed by the *Death of God debate*), and others. I could not believe such open 'unorthodoxy' – should I say 'heresy' – as I encountered in all these writings. But I enjoyed it and its liberating influence.

It was as if, all along, I had been under a reading ban or restriction – an intellectual censorship of some sort. The truth, however, was that no one had ever instructed me to confine myself to the *imprimaturs* and *nihil obstats*. It had been a fanatical and self-imposed restriction. The very radical works I had just come to discover were found in the very seminary library. With this kind of reading, though, I was well on my way to becoming a liberated 'heretic'. Like Martin Luther, I could have stood up and said, "Here I stand, I can do no other. Amen."

From one extreme I moved to the other avoiding anything that, to me, appeared orthodox in the Catholic sense. Not surprisingly, in my fourth year of study I was to ask for a year off in order to re-examine my vocation to go for ordination. I had one more year to go before being ordained sub-deacon. Of course, there were other factors involved in my making this kind of decision, one of which was to gain some practical experience of the world to which I was to minister. I did return to the seminary after the year's period, still hoping to complete my priesthood studies. However, an accumulation of events and developments resulted in my deciding to leave the seminary permanently at the end of my fifth year and taking a different career course. This is how I later came to be associated with the UCM and its Black Theology Project.

4 THE BLACK THEOLOGY PROJECT

My first real exposure to black theology was to a number of papers which had been read at local black theology seminars. Some of these papers were later to appear in the book *Essays on black theology*

(more about this book later). These helped me to form my own ideas and to attempt some writing of my own (see Motlhabi 1974). My main insight, however, came with the reading of Cone's *Black theology and black power* (1969) and Cleage's *The black messiah* (1970). Later, when I was studying in the United States, I found Cleage's other book, *Black Christian nationalism* (1972) to be more radical and appealing than I had found *The black messiah*.

As for Cone, I immediately became his disciple. For the first time, through his persuasive argument, I realised that the gospel could speak directly to my condition. I uncritically took in every word I read from his book with my still limited theological understanding. It was not until I read William Jones's *Is God a white racist: Preamble to black theology* (see Jones 1998) and its argument against literally identifying our own experiences with those of other peoples, as Cone allegedly did with the Jewish experience in the Exodus story, that I began to realise that something was perhaps not quite right. I also sensed a little tendency toward a fundamentalistic reading of the Bible in Cone, but I was quite conscious of my own limited knowledge and theological understanding to imagine that I could question a theological heavyweight like James Cone.

As far as his social analysis was concerned, however, I found it quite compelling and instructive in providing a method of addressing our own socio-economic situation. Needless to say, Cone's influence on my thinking superseded those other influences received from books I had read earlier, which had shaken my foundations. I could identify more with Cone because he was black and because he was addressing a black condition which was not much different from my own condition. I must emphasise that, although I was quite captivated by the content of Cone's analysis, I was more interested in his analysis and method than in the content itself. I was more interested at the time in gaining the tools of the game than in learning about the condition of blacks in America. This focus was still foremost in my mind when I later went to the United States for further study.

When Sabelo Ntwasa and Basil Moore were banned I became first the acting editor of a contemplated black theology magazine, which unfortunately never saw the light of day, and later acting director of the Black Theology Project. Being straight from the seminary and having never done work of this nature before, I had no experience for either of these positions but was happy to learn on the job. In the meantime, a search was instituted by the management team for a director for the project.

At the same time, plans were in progress for the publication of the book on black theology consisting of a collection of articles from a

number of authors. The title of the book was *Essays on black theology*, its original editor being Sabelo Ntwasa. Because his banning took place while the book was in its final stages of editing, however, my name was substituted for his and two articles by Basil Moore were also given different authors.^{ix} Such was the nature of apartheid and its laws, that it created heroes of underdogs and alienated the real heroes.

A banning order meant that a person could not be heard, read or quoted in public. Hence he or she was forced to 'decrease', as it were, while others 'increased'^x in his or her place. It is worth noting that this book, *Essays on black theology*, also appeared later in two overseas editions, one in Great Britain and the other one in the United States of America.^{xi} Both were edited by Basil Moore after he had fled the country to go into exile, first in Britain and finally settling in Australia.

I want to talk briefly about our attempts to establish contact with leading African theologians like John Mbiti while working on plans to establish a black theology magazine. As acting editor of the projected black theology magazine, I wrote to a number of theologians both in South Africa and in Africa at large to solicit their contributions for the magazine. The project had had contacts with some of these people and it was reasonable to assume that they supported our national cause and our line of theology. One of the theologians I wrote to was John Mbiti. His hostility^{xii} to black theology is by now a well-known fact. Cone refers to it briefly in his article in *Black theology: A documentary history* (see Cone & Wilmore 1993).

Mbiti has apparently had differences with people like Desmond Tutu and other black theology-inclined Africans, as well as with American black theologians themselves. At that time I had no idea of his sentiments and thought that he understood our struggle and why we had chosen to make black theology, rather than African theology, our approach in South Africa. At that time South African black theologians found black theology to be more relevant to the needs of their struggle than African theology. The expressed concern of black theology was liberation – not only spiritual liberation in the form of traditional, other-worldly 'salvation' often preached by the church, but also liberation from physical, psychological, socio-political, economic and cultural oppression. In other words, black theology was understood to address the whole person and all his or her human needs. On the other hand, the stress of African theology at the time was on indigenisation/adaptation or what is currently known in Catholic circles as inculturation. It was chiefly concerned with integrating the Christian message into African culture and way of life, or interpreting it in the African idiom – to use the common phrase of the time. Its sole focus on cultural integration did not make it a fully contextual theology.

Black South Africans had another reason for treating African theology with some caution. The apartheid policy at the time was justified on the grounds of cultural differences, while white cultures in the country were regarded as one, in spite of the many white cultural groups that existed. Not only were differences between white and African cultures stressed, perceived cultural differences among the African ethnic and linguistic groups were also capitalised upon and identified as proof of the existence of not only different but also irreconcilable cultures. It was on this basis that the apartheid government established *bantustans*, referred to as 'homelands', for the different African ethnic and language groups. Of course its real agenda at the time is now public knowledge.

Thus for black theologians to have preached indigenisation at the time would have been to play into the hands of the authors of apartheid and to help justify their racist argument, even if the former could have affirmed a single African culture based on their commonalities rather than focusing on artificial differences. It was perhaps partly for this reason that Manas Buthelezi (1974) wrote an article entitled, 'A black theology or an African theology?' in which he explained the different premises of these theologies. Today, with new developments in both black theology and African theology, as well as in other Third World theologies, such distinctions are no longer glaring and there is much room for interaction and cooperation among these theologies.

For instance, there now exists an African liberation theology which recognises the need for different forms of liberation in African societies (see Martey 1993). It also accepts the complementary nature of African theology and black theology. In addition, black theology in America has long acknowledged the African roots of black religion, while it later also came to accept the significance of other forms of struggle such as those focused on class and gender oppression (see Cone 1985). Similarly, both Latin American theology and feminist theology have come to recognise the liberation struggles of Africans, African Americans and Asians in their respective contexts. All these recognitions are reflected in the current existence of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), in which theologians from all these theologies converge to discuss and seek solutions to common and related problems – that is, socio-political, economic, cultural and religious problems.

Returning to my correspondence with Mbiti, he was not very impressed by my invitation for a contribution to the magazine. In fact, he seemed to be annoyed by it. In his response to me he made it quite clear that as an African theologian, he had no interest whatsoever in black theology. Nor were we in South Africa to concern ourselves with this kind of theology which, as he saw it, was purely an American

phenomenon concerned with American social problems. I seem to have a faint recollection that he gave me a brief lecture on African theology and its own concerns, but I cannot swear to that. I felt quite small after reading his letter, and was reminded that he was a PhD while I was simply a NoD, to use King's playful characterisations in *Stride toward freedom* (1958:86)

I had heard about Mbiti while I was still at the seminary and had come to think of him as a role model for African religious and theological aspirants. A friend and classmate of mine had read his *African religions and philosophy* before me and had since then never ceased talking about going to Makerere University, where Mbiti taught at the time of this book's publication. We both left the seminary at around the same time, though, and I do not know what became of his dream to go to Makerere. Be that as it may, Mbiti made it clear to me at the time what he thought of our efforts to theologise about our struggle and that he had no interest in associating with us. I personally still had not read his book and was not to do so until about a couple of years later, when I was already studying theology in the United States. I also read some of his other books and continued to admire his work, but not necessarily his alleged and apparent attitude.

5 GENERAL ACTIVITIES INVOLVING BLACK THEOLOGY

During the years 1973 to 1980 I was in the United States to pursue further theological study in Chicago and Boston. While I was away, I was not aware of any further activities involving black theology in the country until my return seven years later. In the meantime, though, I managed to come across several articles published in *Pro veritate*, a magazine of the Christian Institute before it was declared an affected organisation following the 'findings' of the Schlebusch Commission. According to Frank Chikane, however, there was at least one more conference on black theology before the dawn of the 1980s. It was organised by Rev Fr Smangaliso Mkhathshwa – a Catholic priest and currently Executive Mayor of the City of Tshwane (Pretoria) Metropolitan area – in Maseru, Lesotho, in 1975 (Chikane 1986).

Several of us who had spent some time studying overseas around that time returned home in the early 1980s, to a state of lull and inactivity in black theology. We immediately came together and decided to establish what we called a black theology reflection group. This group met occasionally thereafter to discuss theological issues from the black perspective and to reflect on how we could respond theologically to our country's social problems. In the meantime, a new organisation

was established at the initiative of some white theologians, called the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT).^{xiii}

Most of us in black theology viewed this organisation with suspicion, especially because of its name and its accommodation of South African white theology. We saw it as a subtle attempt to undermine black theology and to bury it once and for all, while restoring some respectability to white theology in the country. There had been some whispers from some sources about the apparent death of black theology, although none of its enthusiasts had been invited to its funeral. The Institute appointed a black general secretary, though, and his overtures to these black theology enthusiasts soon set our minds at rest. A special focus in the Institute was given to black theology and the black theology reflection group was accommodated in its black theology task force.

By 1983 the first conference on black theology was held after a long lull in public activity. One of the implicit aims of the conference, organised by the ICT, was to re-examine black theology and to determine whether it still had any future in the country or whether it should be declared virtually dead and given a decent burial. The theme of the conference was 'Black theology revisited'. The truth was that within the Institute itself black theology was already considered a liability. The year 1983 was marked by the 'return' to non-racial politics in the country, represented chiefly by the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), after over a decade of black consciousness activity.

Black consciousness was being questioned in some quarters nationally, and indeed, many who had been nurtured by this philosophy thought the time had come for a change of strategy and they left the movement to join the UDF. By a change of strategy was meant, of course, a return to Congress (ANC) politics even though its main champion, the African National Congress, was still banned in the country. The leadership of the Institute at the time also had UDF sentiments. Hence it is safe to assume that they, too, were beginning to experience problems not only with black consciousness but also with black theology.

In his background to the conference report, the general secretary of ICT at the time confirms the spirit which prevailed at the conference. He writes, "Some of the questions raised during the conference seemed so [heretical when viewed] from the traditional position of Black Theology that the very foundations of Black Theology were threatened" (Chikane 1983:2). In an apparent reaction to this, the response of one of the speakers, Bonganjalo Goba, was seemingly intended to reassure the participants that black theology was not really dead. Indeed, he implied that the rumours of its death had been

greatly exaggerated. "We are [not] here to resuscitate Black Theology from its slumber ..." he said. "In Zulu I would say *Sizolola Izikhali*: we are here to sharpen our tools or 'swords' in order to challenge again the black Christian community to participate meaningfully in the struggle for authentic liberation" (Goba 1986:58). Despite Goba's protest, however, his statement was a veiled admission that at least the tools of black theology were, indeed, blunt at that stage. Why else the need to sharpen them?

This conference was followed by another one a year later to discuss outstanding issues that had been left hanging in 1983. It was at the latter conference that a paradigm shift in black theology was strongly advocated. It was a shift from the sole focus on racism as the perceived source of all black people's woes, to the inclusion of class and gender forms of discrimination as cardinal sins of the same magnitude as racism. These were judged to deserve equal attention from, as well as equally absolute condemnation by, black theology. The proceedings of both conferences were published three years later in a book entitled: *The unquestionable right to be free: Black theology from South Africa*.

Since that time, there have been four other conferences on black theology, one held in Botswana before the end of the decade and the other three in Johannesburg, Midrand and Pretoria. These conferences were organised by a newly reconstituted Black Theology Project, now under the black theology reflection group and without a formal project (management) structure as it previously had. The second one of them recommended the formation of a new permanent membership structure, the Community of Black and African Theologians (COMBAT), to revive formal activity in black theological reflection and other activities. COMBAT was still-born or ill-fated from the start, however, and was not able to establish even an office because of the absence of full-time staff and resources.

6 BLACK THEOLOGY PUBLICATIONS

It needs to be pointed out that even during the time of lull, while most of the second generation black theologians were still pursuing their studies, they had not entirely abandoned thinking about black theology. A number of them wrote dissertations on the subject, focusing on its various aspects. Among the dissertations published, some of the first were Alan Boesak's *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on black theology and power* (1977); Bonganjalo Goba's *An agenda for black theology: Hermeneutics for social change* (1988); Takatso Mofokeng's *The crucified among the cross bearers: Towards a black christology* (1983); Itumeleng Mosala's *Biblical hermeneutics and black theology in South Africa* (1989); and Cecil Ngcokovane's

Demons of apartheid (1989). These publications dated between 1977 and 1989. There was also at least one published master's thesis by a white woman theologian, Louise Kretzschmar, and probably a number of unpublished ones by others. One notable unpublished doctoral dissertation by a white male theologian, Klippies Kritzinger, gives a historical glimpse of the origin and development of black theology in South Africa and relates it to missiology. A research undertaking of all published and unpublished academic writings in the first twenty years of its existence to assess the interest it generated would make an interesting study and contribute to the history of black theology in South Africa.

Among books published by black theologians, Desmond Tutu's collection of articles, *Hope and suffering* (1983) was named the first of Skotaville Publishers' Black Theology Series. The very first publication on black theology in South Africa was, of course, the 1972 collection of essays already referred to earlier. Tutu's book was followed in the same year by Allan Boesak's collection, *Black and reformed: Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinist tradition* (1983). In 1986 another joint collection of articles already referred to in this paper: *The unquestionable right to be free* was released. A number of black theologians also initiated the process toward the publication of a festschrift for Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This was published under the title, *Hammering swords into ploughshares: Essays in honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu* (1987). Still in the same year Maimela's collection, *Proclaim freedom to my people*, (1987), was also published. A joint venture between South African and American black theologians also produced a collection: *We are one voice: Black theology in the USA and South Africa*, edited by Dwight Hopkins and Simon Maimela (1989) with contributions from both sides.

Apart from the published dissertations, there are no full-sized, single theme manuscripts, produced by any single author so far. At the same time, there are many more articles published in books and journals than those appearing in the above collections. These include contributions not only from blacks but also from white theologians who saw some value in engaging in dialogue with and a critique of black theology.

In 1987 a new journal was launched, called the *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*. The journal originally restricted publication to black theology articles, but it later had to open itself up to articles on African theology and religion, as well as other related topics, in order to broaden its base of contributions. Because of the weak contribution base of the journal, its issues often came out late, before they became more and more irregular until the journal finally stopped publication in 1998. Whether it will ever be able to resume publication again will

depend on whether it is able to survive as an intellectual tool of reflection for the church and the Christian faith in South Africa, and to adapt itself to the changed circumstances in the country, as discussed in the next section. It will also depend on the level of growth in the number of theological students, their desire to pursue further studies in theology, and whether they continue to retain some meaningful and fruitful interest in black theology itself.

7 PARADIGM LOST – IN SEARCH OF A NEW PARADIGM

There have been no major seminars or conferences on black theology in South Africa since 1996. Nor have there been any significant or groundbreaking publications since then. This is regrettable in view of the changes that have taken place in the country since the fall of apartheid and the 1994 democratic elections. It is regrettable also in the light of the new social issues that require urgent theological, especially theological-ethical, reflection and response.

One reason for this lapse of activity is that many veteran black theologians have left academic work and gone into administrative positions. This trend is not conducive to continuing with any serious and enduring academic pursuits. The few who remain in the academy seem, like the whole theological climate now existing in the country, to have been thrown into confusion about what their next step or plan of action should be, and to be paralysed by the new circumstances with their new sets of problems. They have not yet been able to develop a new strategy or a new paradigm to deal with these circumstances.

That there is a new set of problems does not mean that the old ones are entirely solved or done away with, however. The RSCps (race, sex and class problems) remain perennial problems which continue to manifest and mutate themselves in various ways in the new South Africa. Poverty, itself a class issue, has now become even more glaring as poor and deprived people, who were previously hidden in the bantustans, make their way back into the cities in search of jobs and a better livelihood. Here they are also joined by refugees and immigrants from other African countries.

The country's resources, the bulk of which previously went to white privilege and opulence under apartheid rule, now have to be spread more evenly and thinly for everybody. The popular words for this new adjustment are 'levelling the playing fields', which means that we must all become either equally poor in opportunity or equally rich. Of course, this is purely delusional as it does very little to lessen the gap

that exists between those who are destitute and those who are new in the race to social betterment, on the one hand, and those who have had a head-start throughout their lives in attaining to their current privilege and wealth, on the other. All this shows that much work still needs to be done on addressing the issues of race and class.

Other new problems also have serious moral implications and have given rise to a government initiative known as moral regeneration. It is believed that the country is experiencing almost unparalleled moral decay, which calls for concerted efforts to restore the moral fibre of South African society. This moral decay is manifested mainly in socio-economic problems such as crime and general social irresponsibility. It is perhaps quite an indictment on our religious institutions that such an initiative had to come from the government, the primary concern of which should normally be the maintenance of law and order rather than the monitoring of social morality. This only explains the perplexity in which the church and other religious institutions find themselves since political change occurred in this country. Thus, instead of providing moral leadership to society, the church has become a follower of state initiative.

The church (or at least some of its leaders) has, however, often assumed some of the leadership in speaking out on certain moral questions, such as those relating to HIV/AIDS and individual sexual conduct, foreign debt and the economy. Yet its intervention in some of these issues is mostly muted. Needless to say, it also does not speak with one voice (*una voce*) on any of these matters – with the Catholic Church, for instance, dissenting on the use of condoms in the case of HIV/AIDS because it sees such approval as tantamount to condoning illicit sex, especially by unmarried couples. Some of the other churches have addressed the issue of HIV/AIDS and condoms on the basis of greater and lesser evil. While some church leaders have reacted openly to some of the more sensitive issues, there has generally been little theological response to them, especially by black theologians.

One or two church leaders have openly reacted to and made their positions clear on the question of Third World debt and the suffering resulting from it and from policies of international funding institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Other related issues are those of world trade in general, under the leadership of the World Trade Organization (WTO), globalisation and its effects, and concerns about the sustainability of the environment. Responses to all such issues, however, are mostly *ad hoc* and do not provide a basis for sustained theological-ethical representations. Catholic bishops continue to produce pastoral letters on various socio-economic and other issues. These, however, seem to be more 'indoor' and esoteric and do not normally reach the wider

public. This is probably because they are first and foremost meant for the Catholic community, even though few are aware of them; and secondly because there does not seem to be a vehicle for their dissemination to the wider South African public, if this is intended at all.

All the above issues represent the theological-ethical harvest which requires the participation of black theologians, among others, as labourers. Regrettably, such response has not been forthcoming for about a decade. A paradigm shift from focusing chiefly and solely on matters of racial justice to broader issues of social justice and socio-moral integrity in general has so far eluded them. If black theology is to survive and remain relevant in South Africa today, therefore, it must undergo a reorientation and readjustment in its approach to socio-ethical issues so that it can focus on these new developments and changed problems of the new South Africa. This cannot happen, however, without the development of a new generation of black theologians to pick up the mantle from the tired old guard and run with it to the ever-receding theological finish line. At the moment, it is no exaggeration to say that the harvest is, indeed, more than plenty and overwhelming. The labourers, on the other hand, have not only become fewer, but seem to be fast diminishing.

8 CONCLUSION

In its early days black theology was a kind of wake-up call to many young people, especially those who were studying for the church ministry. It reminded them that human liberation was not only a future eschatological event but a present vocation which was to be fulfilled through toil and struggle. It was not a purely spiritual and other-worldly affair, but also a material and this-worldly mission. In other words, the problem of human suffering and oppression could not be solved merely by promises of a future 'kingdom come'. It had to be addressed by practical involvement in the struggle of the here and now and by seeking to make the Christian gospel relevant and meaningful to this struggle.

In the United States black theology seems to have achieved a strong base through the years, primarily as an academic discipline in certain institutions. Although the same was attempted in South Africa, the academic base here was not as strong as in the United States – hence the greater reliance on seminars, conferences and publications to spread its message and to achieve its goal of creating awareness and striving for the relevance of the Christian message.

One can state categorically that earlier generations of black theologians – those theologians who were exposed to black theology

in the first two decades of its appearance – benefited immensely from its teaching and method. With the waning of public activity by main black theology organisations, however, it is not clear how much influence black theology has continued to have on the formation of later younger clergy. Today, Catholic seminaries are more concerned with issues of inculturation – the old indigenisation debate, it seems – than of liberation from the new social ills that now infest our society. The false impression given by this trend is that we have now arrived at freedom square; we can now relax and concentrate on other things. Nothing, indeed, can be farther from the truth.

The fact that some people already declared black theology dead as early as the middle of the 1980s, and that some even found it necessary to protest against such claims, is perhaps quite revealing. To have 'Black theology revisited' as a conference theme, where the need was expressed to 'sharpen its tools' – as Goba declared – raised serious questions, even then, regarding the continued endurance of black theology in South Africa. It was obviously in recognition of the shaky ground on which it continued to stand that a stalwart like Buti Tlhagale, now bishop of Johannesburg, could admit courageously that it was, indeed, dead. Indeed, for many of its advocates in South Africa, black theology remains in existence only by name and as a memory. Many of them continue to cling to the belief of its endurance only in *spirit*. In flesh, on the other hand, it has gently receded into history.

We must conclude by saying, therefore, that perhaps the onus is not upon the doubting Thomases to prove the alleged death of black theology, as the lingering minority of black theologians claim. Rather, it is upon its few remaining faithful adherents to prove its continued endurance and significance. Will the true remaining black theologians in this country please stand – and show their fruits!?

WORKS CONSULTED

Becken, H J 1973. *Relevant theology for Africa*. Durban: Lutheran Publishing House.

Boesak, A A 1977. *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on black theology and power*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Boesak, A A 1983, *Black and reformed: Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinist tradition*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.

Buthlezi, M 1974. A black theology or and African theology? in Moore, B (ed), *The challenge of black theology in South Africa*. Atlanta: John Knox.

- Chikane, F 1986. Foreword to, *The unquestionable right to be free: Black theology from South Africa*, Mosala, I & Tlhagale, B (eds). Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Chikane, F 1983. Black theology revisited. Conference report of the Institute for Contextual Theology, 16-19 August, Wilgespruit, South Africa.
- Cleage, A 1970. *The black Messiah*. New York: Seabury.
- Cleage, A 1972. *Black Christian nationalism: New directions for the black church*. New York: Morrow.
- Cone, J H 1969. *Black theology and black power*. New York: Seabury.
- Cone, J H 1985. *For my people: Black theology and the black church*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Cone, J H & Wilmore, G S 1993. *Black theology: A documentary history*, Vol 1. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Cone J H & Wilmore G S 1999. *Black theology and public talk: Reflections on James H Cone's black theology and black power*, Hopkins, D (ed). Maryknoll: Orbis.
- De Gruchy, J 1979. *The church struggle in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Goba, B 1986. The black consciousness movement: Its impact on black theology, in Tlhagale, B & Mosala, I (eds), *The questionable right to be free: Essays in black theology*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Goba, B 1988. *An agenda for black theology: Hermeneutics for social change*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Hopkins, D & Maimela, S S 1989. *We are one voice: Black theology in the USA and South Africa*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.
- Jones, W R 1990. *Is God a white racist: Preamble to black theology*. Boston: Beacon.
- King, M L 1958. *Stride toward freedom: The Montgomery story*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Maimela, S S 1987. *Proclaim freedom to my people*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Martey, E 1993. *African theology: Liberation and inculturation*. Maryknoll: Orbis
- Mbiti, J S 1969. *African religions and philosophy*. London, Ibadan: Heinemann.

- Mofokeng, E 1983. *The crucified among the crossbearers: Towards a black Christology*. Kampen: Kok.
- Moore, B S 1973. *Black theology: The South African voice*. London: Hurst.
- Moore, B S 1974. *The challenge of black theology in South Africa*. Atlanta: John Knox.
- Mosala, I & Tlhagale, B 1986. *The unquestionable right to be free: Black theology from South Africa*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Mosala, I 1989. *Biblical hermeneutics and black theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Motlhabi, M 1974. Black theology: A personal view, in Moore, B (ed), *The challenge of black theology in South Africa*. Atlanta: John Knox.
- Ngcokovane, C M 1989. *Demons of Apartheid: A moral and ethical analysis of the NGK and Broederbond's justification of apartheid*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Tlhagale, B & Mosala, I 1986. *Hammering swords into ploughshares: Essays in honour of Archbishop Mpilo Desmond Tutu*. Johannesburg: Skotaville
- Tutu, D M 1983. *Hope and suffering*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.

ENDNOTES

-
- 1 A banned person was under a 24 hour house arrest, allowed only one visitor at a time, and could neither publish anything written by him- or herself nor speak in public.
 - 2 Biko was president of SASO at the time, while Pityana was its Secretary General. The two were close and inseparable, although Biko later received more prominence because of his martyrdom status and his publications. Pityana is currently Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa, having previously served in the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism and spent a term as Executive Chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission.
 - 3 Strangely enough, it never dawned upon me at the time to wonder why black and white seminary students were studying at separate institutions. Most of us had come to take these things for granted and never questioned them, even in church structures. This probably explains why it took me so long to discover racism in the church.
 - 4 I have learned only recently from Itumeleng Mosala that this slogan was coined by the erstwhile Secretary General of SASO, Nyameko Pityana. Pityana was present when this announcement was made and said he had been only too happy to let the credit go to Biko.
 - 5 Malcolm X's views are credited with having inspired the Black Power Movement in the United States. King did not approve of the name black power because he thought it was antagonistic to whites and created antagonism toward the black cause. He favoured the term 'black consciousness' or 'black equality', which to him sounded neutral and acceptable. While King also spoke openly of civil rights,

-
- Malcolm preferred to speak of human rights because of their broader connotation (see also Martin Luther King, Jr, *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, 31). For a classical comparison of the two leaders see also James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A dream or a nightmare*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- 6 'Non-religious' here refers to priests, otherwise known as secular priests, who do not belong to any of the Catholic religious orders or congregations, eg, Dominicans, Jesuits, Franciscans, etc.
 - 7 Dr Manas Buthelezi was a graduate of Drew University in the United States. Apart from his activities in black theology, he was to gain prominence through his involvement with the Christian Institute and his radical stand at the Schlebusch Commission of Enquiry. He later became a bishop of the Lutheran Diocese of Johannesburg and quietly disappeared from the scene.
 - 8 *Imprimatur* is Latin for 'may be printed' and *Nihil Obstat* means simply 'no obstacle', that is, there is nothing to obstruct publication.
 - 9 One of these articles, 'Black theology and authority', came under my own name. I also had my own article in this collection.
 - 10 Words used by John the Baptist in deference to Jesus, "He must increase, I must decrease."
 - 11 The British version was *Black theology: The South African voice* (London: Hurst, 1973) and the American version: *The challenge of black theology in South Africa* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974).
 - 12 I recently had the pleasure of meeting Professor Mbiti in person while he was visiting the University of South Africa. When I raised the subject of his attitude to black theology in those days he expressed utter amazement and shock. He said that he had no personal grudge against black theology but had been concerned about its relevance to the African condition. He was not aware of the negative perceptions that I referred to. I felt quite sheepish and wondered whether I had read my sources wrongly.
 - 13 James Cochrane, who is currently Professor of Theology at the University of Cape Town and was involved in planning for the establishment of ICT, has tried to put the record straight on this matter. According to him, it is not true that the ICT was a white initiative, and he refers to the role played by theologians such as Allan Boesak in its conception. The aim here is neither to contradict nor to distort facts. I am only trying to give my own and other colleagues' perspective on the matter at the time, based on our own perceptions of events.