The Thought of Steve Biko as the historicophilosophical base of South African Black Theology by Rev. Malesela John Lamola

1. Introduction

It is hardly possible to do justice to an analysis of the development of political thought in South Africa and the dynamics of the social conflict undergirding this development without making mention of the life, death and thought of Steve Bantu Biko (1946-1977). On the other hand, no historical account of Black Theology, or of the debates accompanying its development, would be complete without taking account of the philosophy of Steve Biko, which was seminal in the development of Black Theology in South Africa. Equally, any account or active construction of a South African Liberation or revolutionary theology which fails to take account of the findings and perspectives emerging from Black Theolgy, and its ideological source-the philosophy of Black Consciousness, would be defective.

In the lexicon of South African protest politics, Black Consciosness as a political philosophy, is synonymous with controversy. It has, from the moment of its embryonic appearance, been greeted with scepticism, cynicism, fear and suspicion. It has also been misrepresented. This negative response to Black Consciousness and its take-over, falsification and misuse by some political factions in contemporary South Africa(bantustan leaders for example), has detracted attention from a serious theological study of and dialogue with the latter, as a revolutionary "weltanschauung" for South Africa. On the other hand, Black Theology, because of its association with Black Consciousness is being marginalized as a political theology. It is feared that its promotion militates against the popular vision of a movement toward a nonracial humanism in South Africa.

As a political philosophy, Black Consciousness, is one of those few philosophies in modern history which, like the socialist movement of the previous century, can claim to be an authentic intellectual product of the creativity of an oppressed people. As a systematic articulation of the ideas of the unpropertied class, it started off with the disadvantage that it had to contest with dominant ideas of some of the most organized ruling classes in the U.S.A. and South Africa. It will be one of the geatest scandals of history if, after preaching a theological methodology of bias in favour of the poor and the underdog, liberation theologians end up colluding with liberal bourgeois classes in pronouncing a summary anathema on Black Consciousness which has painfully and miraculously arisen out of a people who are denied every means of political self-expression and full intellectual development.

The object of this paper is a revisitation of Steve Biko from a black theological historical enquiry. It is an attempt at a reinvestigation and systematic reconstruction of his thought. This is done in the service of both Black Theology in particular and South African political philosophy in general.

Black Theology as an epistemologically self-defined theological system, is a phenomenon which is secondary to a consciousness of the reality of being black in a white racist world. It is secondary to the primary epistemological orientation of black self-awareness and expression, an awareness of the meaning of one's blackness and an acceptance of the demand to view and interpret the world from the standpoint of this self-consciousness. Being a theological system, it is an institutionalisation of a religious awareness of the fact of being black, which seeks to ask and address questions and practical dilemmas from this experience within the context of a formalised religious epistemological system. It is an open-ended way of seeing things through black eyes — as a Christian, and interpreting them in a black way — culturally, politically and theologically.

Therefore, a commitment to a critical black religious hermeneutic is not conditional upon one's affiliation to some "camp of Black theologians". The divisive tendency of traditional liberal thought to analyse and arrange reality into a series of boxes, should be resisted. The existence of a class of professional exponents of Black theology, should be no cause for an entrenchment of a sectarian view of either Black Theology or these theologians. The challenge of Black Theology remains an interventionist call to all black people to hear and interpret the Christian kerygma from the perspective of their context and experience of daily brutalisation and for this reason, its relevance in South Africa is perennial.

2. STEVE BIKO AND BLACK THEOLOGY

The period of the polemics surrounding the emergence of Black Consciousness under the leadership of Biko, that is, the years 1968 to 1971, is regarded as the period of the genesis of Black Theology in South Africa. Related to Biko's analysis of the plight and experiences of the oppressed blacks, was an expose of the role colonial Christianity had played, not only in legitimising the racist South African status quo, but chiefly in helping to cement a slave-mentality and self-alienation in the collective consciousness of black people. Biko's analysis revealed how on the one hand a sacralisation of white European cultural values endowed these values with a religious mystique, while on the other hand African culture was heathenised. This created an inferiority complex in black people. He actively set out to challenge the Black clergy to practically appraise the apparent European inspiration of their "ministry" and to learn that the

sine quo non of authentic, and thus liberating Christian communication lies in its contextuality. The context of suffering, estrangement, induced self-debasement and struggle of the Black people in South Africa called for a Black Theology, which Biko defines as ...a situational interpretation of Christianity... which seeks to relate the present-day black man to God within the given context of the Black man's sufferings and his attempts to get out of it. What he found valuable about Black Theology was that "it shifts emphasis from petty sins to major sins in society, thereby ceasing to teach people to suffer peacefully. He saw this as a remedy for the sustained guilt-inspiring nature of European Christian theology and its homiletics which only served to enhance and deepen the self-alienation and self-hate of black people.

Biko was subject to the conservative influence of a typical African family. He was not a professional theologian, nor a theological student. But through his participation in the University Christian Movement (which existed from 1967 to 1972), and from his close relations with outspoken theological students such as Stan Sabelo Ntwasa and Mokgethi Motlhabi, grasped enough of the Christian religion to engage in his own creative reflection on matters theological, particularly as it affected the political plight of the black community.

By devoting himself to the systematic enunciation and the general propagation of a philosophy of Black Consciousness, Biko served to create an intellectual climate, a Zeitgeitst in which theological questions and activity loosely institutionalised itself into a South African Black Theology. This process was to be the foundational scheme from which the current South African political theology and Church-based political activism was to emerge.

The appearance, language, and objectives of South African Political Theology from the pre-Black Consciousness era is distinctly different from that which immediately preceded it. Before 1969, the leadership of the anti-apartheid ecumenical movement was the preserve of white liberals and white-led institutions, foremost among which were Dr Beyers Naude and the Christian Institute (CI). This movement was largely concerned with "race relations. This concern about "race relations" formed the background against which the policies of the Apartheid regime were evaluated. In this evaluation use was made of a liberal European biblical hermeneutic, especially that of the German theologians of the anti-Nazi movement.3 The impression was created that if only the racist government and its white voters would accept an ethically responsible concept of "race relations" it will lead them to accommodate blacks, sharing the privileges accruing from the current system. All the problems of South Africa would then be done away with. Biko's understanding of Black Consciousness was generated by a compulsion to refute this kind of thinking. He maintained that not only was it wrong, but that it was a dangerous misunderstanding of the South African problem.

His counter-assertions were eventually formalised into a clear agenda of "a struggle for black liberation" as a paradigmatic anti-thesis to the "normalisation of relations between races" mentality which was then in vogue. The problem, he argued, is a deliberate malevolent white racism. This racism which was built into economic and political structures was dependent on the acquiescene of black people, who had been conditioned through the control mechanisms of the system into an apathetic catalepsis. An essential and foundational element of any attempt at a solution, he maintained, was for blacks to realise how this racism, as a social system, feeds on their complacency. They need to wake up, to reject and guard against all stereotypes which this system seeks to inculcate in them, and to realise the potency of their collective communality as a people who are racialistically defined and are made to suffer by reason of that definition.

The impact of this new perspective could not but influence the ecumenical theological thinking which since 1960, under the leadership of the CI and later the SACC, had shown such a dedicated concern for political developments in the country. The most obvious sign of this was the drastic radicalisation of the programme of the CI immediately after 1971. This shift was so clearly evident that the Vorster regime could not ignore it and initiated a series of repressive actions against the CI and its personnel, culminating in them (CI, Beyers Naude and some staff members), being included when the Black Consciousness movement and related organisations were banned in October 1977. This radicalisation of the South African theological language and praxis was facilitated by the churches' painful response to the Black Consciousness challenge of the "fact that, most of the churches have 70, 80, or 90 per cent of their membership within the black world ...(but) have 70, 80, or 90 per cent of controlling power in white hands.4 In 1969 the CI and the SACC established SPROCAS (Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society/Study Programme for Christian Action in Apartheid Society) in conjunction with the Black Peoples Convention, a Black Community Project. In 1972 Ben Khoapa, one of Biko's "lieutenants" was appointed its Director. This act symbolised the formal accommodation of Black Consciousness by the ecumenical Church. In 1974. the CI appointed Dr Manas Buthelezi, then the most respected exponent of Black Theology in South Africa at that time, as its first black regional director.

As Black Christians learnt to refuse token representation in the corridors of ecclesiastical power and theological formulation, they slowly began to occupy influential positions. With the insistent articulation of their black perspective and aspirations the Church began to adopt the poise of a liberation front.

3. THE THOUGHT OF STEVE BIKO: BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS 3.1 Summary

The hallmark of Steve Biko's thought in South Africa's protest politics was his scathing critique of the widely held thesis that the problem in South Africa is racial segregation per se. It followed therefore that it would be remedied by the formation of inter-racial political and social organisations to oppose and subvert Apartheid. Biko rejected the widely held notion that the problem of South Africa was the blacks and that the government did not know what to do with them (cf. the perennial theme of 'The Native Problem' in South African history textbooks). Biko declared that: "There is nothing the matter with blacks (sic). The problem is WHITE RACISM, and it rests squarely on the laps of white society"5. He argued that a remedy against 'organised white racism should be the strong reactive political solidarity of all black people and the cultivation of an assertive critical self-awareness among Black people. This would deny white racism its feeding ground, and as an organised force black people would be able to challenge this structural racism. In his essay on "Black Consciousness and the quest for True humanity, Biko employed the Hegelian dialectical method of the negation of the negation, with a view to producing a positive7. He argued that the dialectic between organised white racism and Black solidarity which gave rise to unequal and conflicting, thus false, human consciousness, should be accepted as an obvious fact. In this process both whites and blacks would be conscientised. The former becoming aware of the racism from which they need to be redeemed, and the latter of their responsibility to redeem the former by refusing to be willing victims of racism. A "slave-mentality" has been cultivated in Black people. This led them unwittingly to collude with their own oppression. Only when they have attained freedom from this mentality, and begin to rise in revolutionary anti-racist selfassertions would this conflict, the dialectic, dissolve into a positive synthesis. White humanity. i.e. human self-consciousness would be starved of its racist superiority complex as there would no longer be blacks willing to have this superiority exercised over them. In the process, "black humanity" would have been emancipated from its self-denigrating inferiority complex. The result of this will be a True humanity, an authentic sense of being human. That is, a new conceptualisation of being human in a new South Africa where blacks and whites will no longer perceive each other in terms of racialistic superiority-inferiority complexes. According to Biko, it was for the attainment of this sense of being human, that Black Consciousness was formulated and propagated. This is the core of Black Consciousness, all that followed was only polemics on the means and methods of achieving this, and a general defence of Black Consciousness. Biko was convinced that all other organisations that were then organised against apartheid, more specifically, the Black Sash, NUSAS, the South Africa Institute of Race relations, and even the Christian Institute, were working on an oversimplified premise. They have taken a brief look at what is, and have diagnosed the problem incorrectly. They have almost completely forgotten about the side effects, and have not even considered the root cause⁹. He saw his task as the isolation of this root cause and pointing out the impact of the side effects of Apartheid on black people.

Unlike all other previous revolutionary analyses of the problem of South Africa, Biko determined not to target his ideological attack against the obviously racist and lethargic whites or the Vorster regime per se. Instead he concentrated on castigating those white people who had come out in the fight against black oppression, as he exmanined their motivation and the mode of struggle they were propagating. Also, instead of the traditional tendency of lamenting the woes inflicted by the apartheid regime on the black community, he turned sharply on the black people themselves, showed them how oblivious they were of the psychological damage racial oppression was inflicting on them, and blamed them for allowing themselves to be oppressed.

3.2 On multiracial anti-apartheid alliances

Biko's uniqueness lay largely in his ability to clinically and incisively analyse the nature and dynamics of South African racism. Beyond the socio-political structure of Apartheid he identified and drew a picture of a society that was disfigured by a form of neurotic deviance. This deviance from its conflicting misconceptions, inspired by a political culture which was forcing people to find the basis of their self-definition in race. According to Biko the root cause, and at the same time effect of this mass dehumanisation or malhumanisation, was a pervasive anti-black racism among the white people of South Africa. A colonial white racism which found expression in the institution of Apartheid. Biko deciphered four model elements of this racism, namely: (1) paternalism, an assumption of the intellectual and moral superiority of the "caucasian race over the negroids, (2) prejudice against blacks — a prejudice which has been reinforced by the distortion of historical facts in state education, and the resultant psychological identification of blackness with negativity and evil; (3) self-induced white fear of blacks10; and (4) a deliberate and well-calculated systematic degradation of black people. Biko went on to assert that whereas all these manifestations of racism could generally be found in any like situation, paternalism was unique to South Africa, where in the late 1960's extraparliamentary groups were teeming with white people who wanted to help black people. He concludes from his analysis that the behaviour of these "liberals" could only be equated with racism. It still harboured assumptions of white hegemony. Those white people had not yet been adequately challenged to criticise their own superiority complex which an apartheid society had naturally ingrained into them. Therefore as they perpetuated a false white humanity, they were reinforcing the false-consciousness of catalepsis in black people.

During the massive government repressive clampdown of 1960-63, all forms of Black resistance were snuffed out by the Verwoerd-Vorster regime. Within that vacuum the Church and the white-led multiracial student movement, the National Union of South African students (NUSAS), emerged as the only two vigorously outspoken 11 voices of extra-parliamentary opposition. Unfortunately the church opposition organised under the Christian Institute, which was found in 1963, and NUSAS, which was then a more or less 40 year old organisation, had their leadership based entirely in the white community. Their concerns were primarily directed at exposing and opposing the injustices of Apartheid against the black section of the population. However, even though they maintained over multiracial membership the mode of articulation of policies and programmes remained "white" due to the social orientation of their leadership. However, even though Liberal whites were speaking on behalf of "pitiful" blacks: all of this was being done within the context of the social constraints imposed by the Apartheid legislation. For instance many of these leaders had never spent any time in a black residential area, more obviously, a black education institution. Having entered the University of Natal in 1966, Biko was elected into the Student Representative Council and as such secured a place in the leadership of NUSAS. This position was to expose him to a distressing observation of how his fellow white comrades perceived the problems of South Africa, and how their mentality was alien to the pains, humiliations and aspirations of black people. In 1968 he led a stormy walkout of all black university students from NUSAS and founded the South African Students Organisation (SASO) on a charter of Black Consciousness. The foundation of SASO was the consummation of a wide-spread feeling of dissatisfaction among politically active black students. Biko expressed it as follows: Even those whites who see much more wrong in the system make it their business to control the response of the blacks to the provocation. No one is suggesting that it is not the business of liberal whites to oppose what is wrong; however, it appears as much a coincidence that liberals—few as they are—should not only be determining the

modus operandi of those Blacks who oppose the system, but should also lead it.12 However, criticism of a situation in which the whites usurped the leadership of the struggle seems to have been secondary to Biko's general analysis. What was primary was his argument that such overtures from white people and the racially integrated organisations they were encouraging was essentially dangerous, misconceived and perilous for the very goal which they thought they were working for, because "...people forming the intergrated black sub-ordinative complex and unchallenged whitesuperiority complex) have been extracted from segregated societies with their in-built complexes of superiority and inferiority and these continue to manifest themselves even in the 'non-racial' set-up of the integrated complex. As a result the intergration so achieved is a one-way course, with the whites doing all the talking and blacks all the listening." Proceeding from this, he stated that the "myth of intergration as propounded under the banner of liberal ideology must be cracked and killed" because it was dangerous in two respects. "...firstly 'it made' people believe that something is being done, when in actual fact the artificial intergrated circles are a soporofic on the blacks and provide a vague satisfaction for the guiltstricken whites." He proceeded: "It works on the false premise that because it is difficult to bring people from different races together 'in South Africa', therefore achievement of this is in itself a step forward towards the total liberation of the blacks"14. Secondly, pointing out that this liking of acceptance by white people is a perfect demonstration of what racial oppression has done to blacks. He explained that blacks have been made "to feel so inferior for so long that for them it is comforting to drink tea or beer with whites who seem to treat them as equals"15. And in turn, this served to boost the ego of these few "acceptable" elite blacks to the extent that they feel slightly superior to other blacks who did not get similar treatment from white people. The result being that, the black political leaders, operating in this multiracial set-up, develop elitist selfimages, which end up alienating them from their own people, thereby thwarting their goal of serving their communities. Taken together this made Biko's analysis a novelty. His criticism of white liberals and multi-racial political groups was the most controversial aspect of his belief and career. He held to this position in a firm and unequivocal manner up to the moment of his death, and sagaciously defended it against the attacks of the white liberal press and the reconciling, white-led Church. The polemic stimulated him to gradually clarify himself while building up the structure of a philosophy of Black Consciousness for South Africa.

3.3 On racial integration

It is necessary to look again at Biko's postulates on racial integration. What we have elaborated on in the foregoing paragraphs is largely his conviction regarding the participation of white liberals in the liberation struggle. Although the same basic principles apply, he needed to develop this matter as it pertained to the road ahead towards a South Africa liberated from racism of the apartheid social system.

The pre-Biko post-1964 anti-apartheid movement mainly operated on the conviction that the process of encouraging racial integration in a society where races were separated from each other by law, did not have to wait for the day of the downfall of the Apartheid regime. It held that people should begin to mix not only socially, but that in addition open up economic opportunities to encourage a black middle class which would help to serve as a link between white circles and the black underdog masses16 It was hoped that this strategy would ultimately not only have a subversive effect on the socio-political structure of apartheid, but that it would also promote much needed understanding between peoples who had grown up being literally socially regimented and psychologically engineered into seeing one another only in racial terms and master-servant categories. Steve Biko contended against this. He maintained that the promotion of racial integration "as often extolled in white liberal circles, is full of unquestioned assumptions. Assumptions which as Biko observed, embraced white cultural values. It is an intergration in which the black man has to prove himself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation" 17. It was as such, not an intergration of two hitherto separated groups, instead, it is an assimilation of Black people into an unchanged white world. To back up this assertion he explained that South African life, i.e. its culture and its formative influences are very much Anglo-Boer in nature. Because white people, both English and Afrikaans, constituted a dominant class in whose hands resided all powereconomic, political and intellectual — the predominant life-values and ideas in South Africa are singularly "white. It is a society that is structured to protect the racist, nationalist and exploitative interests of the white people. He therefore felt that an invitation to Blacks "who can make it" by sections of this racial class to become assimilated, meant a denial of their class identification with their people as well as with their cultural selves in order to ascend into a whitehood of being bourgeous upholders of the apartheid structure, which in Biko's words was nothing but "a white power structure. Consequently, instead of pushing Blacks to join this politico-cultural world of white power Biko declared that "It is an intergration in which Black will compete with Black, using each other as rungs up a step-ladder leading them to white values". 18 It is an invitation to Blacks to climb onto a table which is already set and prepared in a white dominating way, as it were. In response to this invitation, Black people were to scramble over each other, further dividing themselves as the

strong among them use the weak as means of securing a seat at this "white man's table".

But what was Biko's alternative proposal to apartheid's racial segregation and regimentation? It is here that he begins to apply Hegelian dialectics. There should be a negative process in which the related negative self-misconceptions of both white and blacks are destroyed, he proposed. This will in effect lead to the complete destruction of the present "table" with all its trappings. Out of this, a positive trend should emerge. Both whites and blacks, as "true humans" released from a prior racial definition, should get together, as equals, and democratically create a new set-up in which neither would be the guests nor the hosts. There would be complete egalitarianism, and not a mere assimilation of the weak into a value system and social structure which is created and maintained by the powerful". If by integration you mean there shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society as determined by the will of the people, then I am with you, since ".... at the heart of true intergration is the provision of each man, each group, to rise and attain the envisioned self"19. This line of thinking found its way into the 1971 Policy Statement of SASO. It reads "SASO believes that ... intergration cannot be realised in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Integration does not mean assimilation of blacks into an already established set of norms drawn up and motivated by white society. Intergration implies free participation by individuals in a given society and proportionate contribution to the joint culture of the society by all constituent groups"19b.

These assertions made under the loose context of a quest for a true humanity, were to expose for Biko a problem which became the focus of his entire thought. He had become aware that black people had no strongly expressed understanding of their culture in which their current oppression and aspiration for liberation was assimilated. They had no collective, affirmative and native Weltanshauung to present at that summit of the amalgamation of hitherto conflicting South African socio-cultural self-perceptions. A development of their "culture" or self-consciousness had been thwarted and totally disfigured, if not destroyed, by centuries of racist colonialism and Apartheid. To make matters worse, black people, in Biko's view, had internalised this affront to their cultural being to the extent that affected even their political articulation. They could stand up as a people and look white people in the eye with a coherent and unequivocal declaration of their demands; they always went begging cap in hand, even for political rights unalienably theirs. This was Biko's only lamentation: To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine

a kind of black man who is man only in form... reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as 'the inevitable position'. In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in silent condemnation of white society, but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his master's impatient call... His heart yearns for the comfort of white society and makes him to blame himself for not having been 'educated' enough to warrant such luxury.20 Biko opined that Black people had been reduced to, cowed-down, selfalienated copy-cats who were perpetually enticed to graduate into whitehood. He pointed out that the distortion of African history by the imperialists was one of the most significant assaults against African selfhood in South Africa. He indicated that, "the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. So negative is the image presented to him that he tends to find solace only in close identification with the white society"21. Pondering the extent of alienation and the resultant negative self-image of the black people, Biko sadly, but truly concluded: "All in all the Black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely drowned in his own misery, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity"22. In the light of this, Biko rejected the proposed integration because as far as he could see, the Blacks were not yet ready to integrate self-assertively and with a pride in themselves. Any hasty integration will merely enhance their individual self-alienation as they realise that they can never become whites, as that, it seemed, is what their present mentality sets them to aspire for. In line with this observation in his "Steve Biko — A Tribute". Desmond Tutu remarks that "with his brilliant mind that always saw to the heart of things, Steve realised that until blacks asserted their humanity and their personhood, there was not the remotest chance for reconciliation in South Africa. For true reconciliation is a deeply personal matter. It can happen only between persons who assert their own personhood, and who acknowledge and respect that of others. You don't get reconciled to your dog, do you?"23. What Tutu, using the language of South African political theology calls reconciliation, Biko, in raw political terms, called "integration. Biko took it together as follows:" The first step, therefore, is to make a black man come to himself: to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process,. This is the definition of Black Consciousness.'124

3.4 Conclusion

This body of thought, a critical analysis of both the South African political struggle and in particular the devastating plight of a black

person under apartheid, originally challenged Black theologians and revealed the need of a Black Theology. A theology which in its nascent stages was quite correctly viewed as being primarily pastoral, albeit "revolutionarily pastoral. It was revolutionary in redeclaring the "somebodiness" of a people who have been taught that they are dispensable nothings by reason of their skin colour alone, and by fixing this declaration on the religious faith so tenaciously held by the black masses, an eventual black uprising against white domination was rendered inevitable. Biko saw Black Theology as a sine qua non of black redemption from the throes of the highly organised white racism of apartheid. In his view, Black Theology is an attempt "to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and his daily problems ... to describe Christ as a fighting God, not a passive God ... is an important aspect of Black Consciousness, for quite a large proportion of black people in South Africa are Christians still swimming in a mire of confusion—the aftermath of the missionary approach." A theological expression related to addressing colonial Christianity, one of the current media of black selfsubjugation was sorely needed, consequently a formulation of a black theological critique of white Christianity and society resulted25.

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