



‘SITE OF STRUGGLE’ IN SOUTH AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

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AFRICAN ANECDOTES

- When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we [Blacks] had the land. The white man said to us, “let us pray”. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we [Blacks] had the Bible.
- “And we got the better deal!” (Desmond Tutu)

- “In olden times there were two might[y] nations who were fighting over a certain issue. In their war the one conquered the other one and took all their cattle away. They took even their children captive and put them into the school of the victorious nation ... They were given some work to do in the morning before they went to school. In the house of the Pope there was a Bible which was kept under lock by him and only read by himself. On a certain day he [the Pope] had to go for a few weeks to another place and he forgot to lock the Bible up at home. When the boys were sweeping his home they found the Bible unlocked. When they began to read it they discovered that their nation which had been demolished so badly by the war could never be restored unless they would get a book like this one When they came back from school they bought a copybook and copied the whole Bible”. [Isaiah Shembe, 1933]

- Each anecdote articulates that ...
- The Bible represents 'Christianity';
- The Bible is component of missionary-colonialism;
- The Bible is central to socio-cultural and socio-economic systems of exploitation;
- The Bible has been appropriated by Africans;
- And the Bible is 'a site of struggle'

SYSTEMS OF EXPLOITATION

- South Africa is characterised by the following 'time-entangled' [Achille Mbembe 2001] systemic relationships:
- a mercantile and feudal system institutionalised by Dutch colonialism during the second half of the 17th and most of the 18th century (1652–1795)
- a system of British colonial and racial capitalism (1795–1890) and a related system of British colonial and mineral capitalism (1890–1948)
- an intensified system of racial capitalism institutionalised by white Afrikaner (apartheid) rule (1948-1990)
- a new system (since 1990) of democratic capitalism, centred on a neo-liberal, first-world, non-racial capitalist enclave (30%) that is disengaging itself from a large part of the black labour force (70%) [Sampie Terreblanche, 2002]

AN IMPLICATED BIBLE

- By maintaining a good correspondence with them, we shall be able in time to employ some of their children as boys and servants, and to educate them in the Christian Religion, by which means, if it pleases God Almighty to bless this good cause ... many souls will be brought to God, and to the Christian Reformed Religion, so that the formation of the said Fort and Garden, will not only tend to the gain and profit of the Honourable Company, but to the preservation and saving of many men's lives, and what is more, to the magnifying of God's holy name, and to the propagation of his gospel, whereby, beyond all doubt, your Honors' trade over all India will be more and more blessed [Leendert Janz and Nicolaas Proot, 1649]

- Africans, it was argued by Robert Moffat (1820) and others, must be taught to turn away from their inefficient mode of production so that, using God's talents, they might bring forth the greatest possible abundance. "Only then would black communities be animated by the spirit of commerce that -- along with the Gospel of Christ -- promoted exchange on a worldwide scale. Only then might they be part of the sacred economy of civilized society" [Jean and John Comaroff, 1993].

- In advocating for apartheid (racial separation), the Afrikaner poet, Bible translator, and member of the Gereformeerde Kerk, J.D. du Toit claims that he has no single biblical text to show that apartheid is biblical: “I don’t have a text, but I have the Bible, the whole Bible. My argumentation would proceed from Genesis to Revelation” [1944].

- “Our nation needs, as [a] matter of urgency . . . an ‘RDP of the Soul’” [Nelson Mandela, 1999; Thabo Mbeki, 2006].
- In our South African “time of entanglement” [Achille Mbembe, 2001] the Bible is a thoroughly entangled in and across these systemic moments.

THE CHURCH AND THEOLOGY AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

- *The Kairos Document* (1985, 1986) identified and analysed three contending forms of 'church' and 'theology' in the South Africa of the 1980s: State Theology, Church Theology, and Prophetic Theology.
- "State Theology" was identified as the theology of the South African apartheid State which "is simply the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy".

- “Church Theology”, it was argued, was in a limited, guarded and cautious way critical of apartheid. “Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation”.
- *The Kairos Document* deconstructs these two forms of theology and advocates for a “Prophetic Theology”, a theology which “speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand” against the apartheid state.

SITES OF STRUGGLE

- The concept 'site of struggle' has been an important socio-theological concept in South African theology (1970-80s)
 - The concept refers to the inherently conflicted/contested identity of a particular institution or discourse
- South African 'Contextual Theology'
 - Church as a site of struggle
 - Theology as a site of struggle
 - Biblical interpretation as a site of struggle
- South African 'Feminist/Women's Theology'
 - African theology as a site of struggle
 - African culture as a site of struggle
 - Biblical interpretation as a site of struggle
- South African 'Black Theology'
 - Biblical interpretation as a site of struggle (Phase I)
 - The Bible as a site of struggle (Phase II) (1987)

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

- *The Kairos Document* was a product of the community-based process of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), and articulated most clearly what was known as 'Contextual Theology', a variant form of liberation theology.
- However, like 'African Theology' more generally, Contextual Theology operated with a 'hermeneutics of trust' towards the Bible.

- *The Kairos Document* argued that the answer to the theological struggle against “State Theology” and “Church Theology” was , first, to proclaim (in the 1996 Second Revised Edition) that “Our KAIROS impels us to *return to the Bible* and to search the Word of God for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today”; and
- Second, to proclaim (as both editions do) that “State Theology” generates its theological position “by misusing theological concepts and biblical texts for its political purposes”, and that “the type of faith and spirituality that has dominated Church life for centuries”, now named “Church Theology”, “has no biblical foundation”.

AFRICAN, BLACK, & FEMINIST THEOLOGY

- South African 'African Theology', 'Black Theology', and 'African Women's Theology' adopted a similar stance towards the Bible in the late 1970s and early 1980s (eg. Gabriel Setiloane, Desmond Tutu, Bernadette Ncube).
- The Bible belongs to these theologies in the sense that doing theology without it is inconceivable.
- The Bible is perceived to be primarily on the side of the Black African struggle for liberation and against apartheid.

- However, from within Black Theology a second phase asserted itself in the late 1980s (represented for example by Takatso Mofokeng and Itumeleng Mosala).
- They rejected a 'hermeneutic of trust' in the Bible and advocated for a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.
- It was not only biblical interpretation that was a site of struggle, but the Bible, itself – inherently and intrinsically.
- Furthermore, Mosala warned, a failure to recognise the Bible as a site of struggle would lead to alliances being formed between contemporary ruling class elites and the ruling class elites of the final form of the Bible as we have it.

AFTER LIBERATION: THE NEXT LECTURE

- Mosala's warning has not been heeded, and the dominant ideologies of the Bible have been co-opted by an alliance of the dominant sectors of the state and the dominant sectors of the churches.
- So it is important to revisit Mosala's understanding of the Bible as 'a site of struggle'.
- This is the focus of the next lecture: "The Bible as a Site of Struggle in South African Black Theology".
- Significantly, at the same time as the Bible is being recognised as a site of struggle, culture, gender, health, and sexuality are also becoming sites of struggle alongside race and class.