

Allen Boesak Black & Reformed, 1984

Chapter V

Guarding the Faith: Reflections on the Banning of Black Theology Literature in South Africa

Since the beginning of the 1970s a new theological expression has found articulation in black-Christian circles in South Africa. It is called black theology. It caught on like a fire and was accepted by many in the black community as an authentic, meaningful expression of their Christian faith. Articulate black theologians immediately began to put into words the meaning and significance of black theology for black Christians. Yet today, some ten years later, most of the material regarding black theology may no longer be read by South Africans. There is only one book written by a black available, together with a few articles. Apart from that, the only writing on black theology available is the criticism offered by white theologians.

Obviously the government is trying to ban black theology.

Section 1 of the Publications Act 42 of 1974 states that the criteria designed to serve as the basic standards for the censoring of films, publications, and public entertainment are based on "the constant endeavor of the population of South Africa to uphold a Christian view of life." Apart from the fact that some legal ex-

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perts consider the wording of the act "an insult to the art of statutory drafting" (as J. D. van der Vyver put it), there are other questions that must be raised. For instance, can one really speak of a "constant endeavor of the population of the Republic of South Africa," when we are so clearly a multireligious society? And can one speak of the endeavor of the "population" to uphold a "Christian" view of life, as if those who call themselves Christian were Christians, and as if this "endeavor" is the most natural thing in the world for those who live in South Africa?

The most serious question is, What "Christian" view is the government upholding? The view that the most important thing about human beings is their racial classification? That persons can be judged according to the color of their skin instead of the content of their character? That 13 percent of the land can justly be "allotted to" 80 percent of the population, whereas 87 percent goes to whites? That whites, *because of their whiteness*, have the right to decide for everybody else, thereby treating God's human creatures like cattle that can be herded from one part of the country to another? But why go on? Bearing just this much in mind, it is no wonder the South African government wishes to ban black theology.

"Guardian of the Faith"?

The government has made a "study" of black theology. The results can be found in the infamous Schlebusch/Le Grange Report and make incredible reading for anybody who knows anything about black theology. Dr. Manas Buthelezi has written a brilliant reply to that report. Unfortunately, as one might have guessed, I cannot repeat his arguments here for the sake of those who have not read his critique, because it appeared in what is now a banned publication.

But another point must be made. In banning something of a theological nature the South African government makes a *theological* judgment. Theology has to do with one's faith and how that faith finds expression in one's daily life. If that faith is threatened, one tries to protect it. In banning black theology, the government has taken upon itself to be the "guardian of the faith."

We are confronted with the pretension that the government knows the true faith, accepts it, lives by it, and resolves to protect it. We know that this is a belief highly acclaimed in classic Reformed confessional documents and that the government also has the duty to guard the faith as well as to protect the faithful. One must remember, however, that this is a point of view formulated at a time when church and state, sword and word, were almost indistinguishable, and when the ideal of a theocracy was kept very much alive. The situation is quite different today, and most Reformed churches have ceased to hold their governments to that duty in the sense in which it was originally meant.

Evidently, however, the government in South Africa does see itself in such a role. It considers itself a Christian government, a proper channel to "further the aims of the Kingdom and to withstand the powers of the Anti-Christ," as the Belgic Confession says. But the question remains: Dare a government, which through its policies and practices so clearly deviates from scripture, whose laws are so blatantly unjust that its purported Christianity is a blasphemous mockery, take upon itself the role of "guardian of the faith"? Surely it must be obvious that a government that persecutes the faithful cannot at the same time be the protector of the faith? The Bible contains not only Romans 13 (how government ought to be); it also includes Revelation 13—how government ought *not* to be. The servant of God can very easily become the beast. This is one of the things black theology wants to make clear.

In order to understand this point even better we must take a brief look at what the government of South Africa is trying to ban. Banning something means that it is considered "undesirable." It does not contribute to better mutual understanding and better interpersonal relationships. As writing, black theology is considered "inciting," "undermining the good order of public life" and the authority of the government. It constitutes a threat to the "Christian view" of life. Therefore, it has to be done away with.

What is black theology, then? Black theology is the attempt of black Christians to understand and interpret their situation in the

light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They want to do this in such a way that the black community understands that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity.

The situation in which blacks live is a situation of oppression. Blacks are disenfranchised and have no rights recognized by law. They are considered unequal, and they live under laws that have robbed them of their dignity and self-respect. The gospel, however, is a gospel of liberation. Therefore, black theology is a theology of liberation. It believes that Christianity is not a "white religion," an instrument for the effective oppression of blacks. It believes that God is a God of justice and liberation, always choosing the side of the weak and the downtrodden. It believes that God has taken sides in the South African situation and calls upon blacks to join in the struggle against inhumanity and injustice.

The "why" of black theology is not difficult to understand. Until now, white Western Christian theology lived under the illusion that it was a *universal* theology, speaking for all those who called themselves Christian. Christian theology had been cast into a white Western mold, reflecting the beliefs of the rich and the powerful as prescribed by their position of wealth, comfort, and power. It did not reflect the cries and the faith of the nonwhite poor and oppressed. The anxieties of the slaves of white Christians, the fears of indigenous peoples decimated by whites in order to take over their land, the despair of those who were kept in economic and political servitude by the systems imposed by white Christians—the plight of these unfortunates was not even considered in Christian theology. Christian theology had become a white theology, an ideology justifying the privileged position of those in power, rather than the critical sword of the gospel revealing the truth of God's mercy and justice.

Black theology also calls itself a "contextual" theology: it functions, and wants to be understood, within a particular situation. In South Africa, the context of black theology is the life experience of blacks in South Africa—an experience shaped by the realities of a system called apartheid. Therefore it deals with apartheid, pass laws, racial discrimination, poverty, oppressive "security" laws, economic exploitation, and all the other bitter realities of being black in South Africa.

Black theology also has to deal with the questions arising out of this situation: What does it mean to be black in South Africa? What does it mean to live in a world controlled by white racists? What if one believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and these others also call themselves Christians? What if they say they believe in the same Bible, even deriving from it the arguments they use for the destruction of your humanity?

We now begin to have an inkling of what might be moving the government when it bans books on black theology. In dealing with their situation, black theologians have been as frank and honest as one dares to be in South Africa. The themes of oppression, liberation, and anger ring out like a bell in every discussion.

But there is more. Black theology also speaks of the discovery of being a human being. As a theology, it is not merely a reflection on a situation or an experience. It is not a political ideology. It deals with black realities *in the light of*, and under the critique of, the word of God. Of course, this means that the situation will be judged severely, but it also means that black theology itself falls under the judgment of the word. It deals with suffering and hope, with love and peace, with reconciliation and justice, with oppression and liberation from oppression. Its demands are clear for whites, but they are just as clear for blacks.

Once again, black theology is the expression of the faith of black Christians. It says that in spite of white manipulation (slavery, "sons of Ham," the theology of apartheid), the gospel is still God's liberating word. It says that the covenant God of the Torah and the prophets cannot be *possessed*, least of all by oppressors. God cannot be overcome, least of all by the pharaohs, the Baals, and the Dragons of this world.

Black theology is not the *only* theological expression in the world, but in my opinion it is the only authentic way for blacks to pursue their Christian faith. It gives hope, restores faith, kindles joy, and brings life again.

This is what the government wants to ban.

Black theology is indeed a ringing, honest, and absolutely necessary indictment of white Christianity in South Africa. It is a

burning flame of legitimate anger at what is being done in the name of the God whose very name spells liberation, compassion, justice, love. Yet at the same time black theology offers reconciliation and peace in a situation where citizens do not trust each other, where we have been driven apart by laws, and where we are kept apart by fear and hatred. It speaks of Christian hope where so many have lost all hope.

It is true that whites have difficulty with the concept of reconciliation and love in black theology. Black theology clearly says that reconciliation does not mean to gloss over what is wrong, to hide evil, and to harmonize what cannot stand side by side. It does not mean taking hands and singing "black and white together." For black theology, reconciliation means confronting evil, unmasking sin, and coming together through the sharing of sorrow, repentance, suffering, and death. Christian love is not a matter of feeling good but of doing what is right. Black theology offers liberation, not only to blacks but also to whites, telling them that they will never be free from their fear until blacks are free from bondage; telling them that in Christ the walls of partition have been broken down and the true Christian view is that of a country where all its citizens live in peace—together. It is not the peace that is the containment of violence or merely the absence of war (civil war?), but the peace that is the active presence of justice.

Ananias Mpanzi has said that although black theology directs its voice to blacks, it hopes that whites will also hear and be saved.

This is what the government wants to ban.

In this kind of faith lies the salvation of South Africa. This is the kind of faith South Africa needs to save us from the idolatry of a civil religion that carries within itself the seeds of self-destruction. A government that will not face the truth about itself is totalitarian and incapable of being saved. It legitimizes a false consciousness and a pseudo-innocence in the minds of the people, thereby piling up the stones that kill the prophets.

By banning the truth, it bans not only prophetic judgment but also the possibility of repentance and conversion. It prevents the people from understanding "the things that make for peace"; it is in fact persecuting Christians because of their faith. It becomes an

adversary of the liberating and reconciling work of God in the world, an enemy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is foolish bravery to try to block the God of justice.

Ask the pharaoh.

It must be made clear that black theology, as an expression of faith, cannot be banned. Of course the South African government can ban books and articles. It can ban the persons who wrote them. But it cannot take away the faith of an oppressed people, the discovery that God always has been, and is now, on the side of the poor and the needy. It cannot take away the truth that this God is passionately involved in history for the sake of the lowly. It cannot take away the message of liberation that the Bible brings and it cannot dilute the call that is inherent in biblical proclamation—the call to participate with God in the struggle for the kingdom and its justice in the world.

This is not to say that white Christians have not tried to do so. God knows *how* they have tried! They have tried to manipulate the biblical message; they have tried to make of God a tribal, white God; they have tried to spiritualize the dynamic power of the gospel, almost succeeding in making it the opiate of the people. But—and this may rightly be called a miracle—God has once again proven to be God. God's word cannot be bound.

One must admit that there has been a measure of "success" for the government. Its actions against black theology have made it easy for South African churches, so deeply imbued with the sin of racism, to avoid the challenge of black theology and to resist its impact. What the government has done has also made it easy for the churches to avoid meeting the challenge of black consciousness. The result is that a theology relevant to the needs and the struggle of blacks is operative only in "pockets" of concerned and prophetic Christians—vulnerable, frowned upon by church leadership, and wide open to intimidation by civil authorities.

The theology that should have been gratefully received by the whole of the church, accepted by the church as a gift from God, is still seen as undermining "official" theology. Many in the churches regard black theology as at worst communist-inspired and politically subversive, and at best as some sort of a guerrilla theology. I am not thinking only of those churches that regard

themselves as "white" churches, and I am not speaking only of whites in the church. I am also thinking of black Christians. For so many of them, government action against black theology and black theologians has brought fear and anxiety so that once more blacks have found it expedient to flee with nervous enthusiasm into the false sanctuaries of an anemic, pietistic, pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die theology to prove to church leaders (and the government?) that they are not "political" but "evangelical." Once again, the false dichotomy between the "spiritual" and the "worldly" (read: political) gospel is being extolled as virtuous and this heathen way of life is praised in churches already over anxious not to disturb the existing order.

So the South African churches will take that much longer to come to grips with the realities of the South African situation. It will take us that much longer to completely understand our role and responsibility in the struggle for liberation.

To understand and accept black consciousness in the Christian church in South Africa is not merely to understand the necessity of genuine black leadership in a given historical moment. Black consciousness entails a new understanding of oneself, of one's situation, and of the dynamics of struggle. It means coming to grips with the realities, limitations, and possibilities of one's own situation.

With regard to the church, this would mean that the church in South Africa would no longer have an inflated opinion of itself, but understand its role as servant in the world. It would understand its own identity as a church and its identification with either the oppressed or the oppressor. Once it has succeeded in overcoming its fear, it would ultimately, by God's grace, become an authentic agent of liberation and reconciliation in a torn and sorrowfully divided society.

I sincerely believe that black theology would have been able, in its small way, to help the church in understanding all this. Born in the communities of the poor and the oppressed, black theology could have helped to bring the church closer to the people it hopes to serve. Now it is still largely hidden from our eyes. All this I would consider the most tangible result and at once the tragic success of government action against black theology.

But I must repeat: no government can ban black theology. It cannot ban it, because it cannot really ban the faith of a people. That is why the truth for which black theology stands will increasingly be authenticated in the lives and witness of black Christians in South Africa. It wins hearts and minds because it is authentic and life-giving. It convinces because it is, in the true sense of the word, gospel truth. If it poses a threat to the present system in South Africa, it does so because the gospel, proclaimed honestly and in obedience to Christ, is always a threat to that which is wrong. It forms a threat because the way of life this government wants to protect is in many respects the antithesis of the demands of the gospel. It forms a threat because loyalty to Christ the Lord is superior to loyalty to Caesar.

Imagine, God Forbid . . .

Dorothee Sölle tells a story from Soviet Russia that explains very well why the authorities are waging their war on black theology in South Africa. An old lady, forgetting that she was within earshot of a local party secretary, said to her friend: "Thank God, it looks like rain."

Disturbed, the party man said: "But you must know by now, Comrade, that you cannot say that. God does not exist."

"Ah, yes, Comrade," replied the old lady, "I understand that. But imagine, God forbid, that there is a God!"

South African government officials, along with many others, know that there is a God. But their God is white—or colorless, which is the same thing. Their God blesses their laws and gives them the authority to make even more such laws. Their God blesses their guns, and gives them more money for their gold so they can buy even more guns. The eyes of their God are closed to the injustices they perpetuate.

Black theology talks about a God who sides with the oppressed. God listens to their cry; their suffering becomes God's suffering. God identifies with them. God's power is proved (ask the pharaoh!); God's promise is true. God will deliver the needy and helpless:

God, give your own justice to the king,
 your own righteousness to the royal son,
 so that he may rule your people rightly
 and your poor with justice.

Let the mountains and hills
 bring a message of peace for the people.
 Uprightly he will defend the poorest,
 he will save the children of those in need,
 and crush their oppressors. . . .

He will free the poor man who calls to him,
 and those who need help,
 he will have pity on the poor and feeble,
 and save the lives of those in need;
 he will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage,
 their lives will be precious in his sight. . . .

Blessed be his name forever. . . .
 May every race in the world be blessed in him,
 and all the nations call him blessed!

Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel,
 who alone performs these marvels!
 Blessed forever be his glorious name,
 may the whole world be filled with his glory!
 Amen. Amen! [Ps. 72, Jerusalem Bible].

" . . . Imagine—God forbid!—that there is *such* a God!"