

**THE NEED FOR “A FIGHTING GOD”:  
Biko, Black Theology and the Essence of Revolutionary  
Authenticity**

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**Abstract:**

There is an upsurge of renewed interest in South Africa in Black Consciousness, Black theology and consequently in the work of Steven Bantu Biko who remains a central figure for a movement that now seems to inspire a new generation, especially pertaining to the raging debates on Africanity, decolonisation, and Africanisation. This author believes that this resurgence presents an historic moment that calls for a serious re-examination of Biko’s thought. Even though Biko’s reflections on Black theology per se were sparse, they are extremely important in my view, and open up new avenues for Black theological reflection and praxis as regards the fundamental questions of integrity and authenticity in global struggles for freedom, equity and dignity. It is my view that in these struggles Black liberation theology is not only relevant but necessary. This article discusses the contexts within which modern South African Black theology came into being, explores Biko’s definitions of Black theology, and the ways in which Biko’s understanding of Black theology searching for “a fighting God” and Black theology as “not a theology of absolutes” opens up the possibilities for enriching the meaning and relevance of Black theology today.

**KEYWORDS:** Black liberation theology, Black consciousness, White-controlled academia, authenticity, Black singularity, decolonisation, absolutes, self-critical openness

**“A Fire No Water Could Put Out”**

In many ways it is a blessing that modern Black liberation theology in South Africa did not emerge within the structures of academia. In the United States, James Hal Cone, the father of modern Black liberation theology,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I distinguish between the Black theology movement of the late 1960s onward, starting with the work of James Cone, and the early beginnings of Black theology as expressed for example in the writings and preaching of the Christian leaders of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century slave revolts such as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner in the United States and Jan Paerl and Cupido Kakkerlak in South Africa, see Russel Viljoen, *Jan Paerl, a KhoiKhoi in Cape Colonial Society, 1761-1851*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006.

wrote his *Black Theology and Black Power* as an indisputably academic work.<sup>3</sup> Yet without doubt, the earliest expressions of Black liberation theology, historically, came into being within contexts of roiling revolutionary resistance. Dona Kimpa Vita from the Kongo was burned at the stake by the Portuguese as a revolutionary resister to colonialist oppression and the imperialist appropriation of the Christian faith by the Roman Catholic Church on July 2, 1706. It is she whose visions saw Jesus and his mother Mary as African, not as an icon for meditative (or syncretistic missionary?) purposes, but inspiring her to resistance to the foreign powers occupying her country. Hers was, as far as we know, the first explicit Black theology as an African expression of black revolutionary resistance to imperialism. No wonder the present generation of young, African activists acknowledge this Christian young woman as “the mother of African revolution.”<sup>4</sup> She died a martyr of a revolutionary African faith.<sup>5</sup>

And it was Bishop Henry McNeal Turner who stirred the embers of a militant Black theology of liberation in South Africa. The “Ethiopian movement”, those first black independent churches who broke away from established “mission” churches for political and anti-colonialist reasons and aligned themselves with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, were powerfully drawn to it by the radical theology and teachings of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, who visited South Africa in 1896.<sup>6</sup> It was that same Turner who first uttered the words, “God is a Negro!”<sup>7</sup>; words that would throw James Cone into a vortex of white fear, umbrage and offended academic dignity when he dared to portray Jesus Christ as the Black Messiah in a

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<sup>3</sup> James Hal Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Boston: Seabury, 1969

<sup>4</sup> See Ne Kunda Nlaba’s stirring documentary film, “Kimpa Vita: The Mother of the African Revolution” <https://amazon.com:Kimpa-Vita-Mother-African-Reolution>.

<sup>5</sup> See John Kelly Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony, Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and The Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Elphick, “Evangelical Missions and Racial ‘Equalization’ in South Africa”, in Dana L. Robert, (ed.), *Converting Colonialism, Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914, Studies in the History of Christian Missions*, R.E. Frykenberg and Brian Stanley, (eds.), Grand Rapids and London: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008, 119.

<sup>7</sup> See Andre E. Johnson, “God is a Negro: The (Rhetorical) Black Theology of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, *Black Theology* 13:1, 29-40, DOI:1179/1476994815Z.00000000045. See also Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition*, Langham: Lexington, 2012.

work that caused such turmoil in white controlled academia.<sup>8</sup> *Black Theology and Black Power* remains a brilliant, unrelentingly challenging classic, laying the foundations for Black theology in its present form emphatically, clearly, and systematically.

However, in doing so, Cone and those Black theologians of the first hour, had to battle fiercely to create space for Black theology within the closed, racialized, Euro-centricity of American academia. They did gain some space eventually, but it cost years of struggle even today not completely won. Crucially, South African Black theology, in those first vital years, was spared those time- and energy consuming (some would argue unnecessary) struggles, having the space to allow the debates among ourselves to mature. How else would we have been able to engage in the critical and especially self-critical reflections so crucial for the authenticity of revolutionary activity?<sup>9</sup>

Birthered into, and within, the heat of struggles for justice, freedom, and dignity, Black theology in South Africa could not but be indelibly shaped, moulded, and infused by those struggles. Being born into the literal flames of struggle in that decisive phase since the early seventies, baptised with

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<sup>8</sup> At a different level, and in different ways, the upheaval in the Black church, in the US as well as in South Africa, was as undeniable.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance the forceful, unadorned way in which Steve Biko speaks of the necessity of Black consciousness for Black people, an issue we discuss in the final section of this contribution. One thinks also of the robust debates between Itumeleng Mosala, Desmond Tutu, and Allan Boesak on the use (and usefulness) of Scripture for Black liberation theology. These were all indispensable and extraordinarily important debates, waged outside of the control of the white academy, giving us the space and freedom for intellectual honesty in the exchange of ideas without having to subject ourselves to the approval or disapproval of white, Eurocentric academic opinion. This does not mean that Black theology in South Africa was spared the full force of the onslaught from white theologians ensconced in their positions of power and academic privilege. Black theology threatened them theologically as much as it threatened the apartheid government politically. Neither does it mean that white theologians would not use these intra-black debates to “pick sides” and attempt to apply their political divide-and-rule tactics in the field of theological discourse. This was the case both during the late 70s and the 80s, as well as in the immediate post-1994 period when Black theology was written off as “passé”, since “liberation” had come and we had to concentrate on “post-apartheid” themes such as “democracy,” “reconciliation,” and “reconstruction.” See for this e.g. Vuyani Vellem, “Ideology and Spirituality: a Critique of Villa-Vicencio’s Project of Reconstruction,” *Scriptura, an International Journal of Bible, Religion, and Theology in Southern Africa*, 105, (2010), 547-558. As well, Black theology had to fend off the attempts to substitute Black liberation theology for a deeply Western-inspired “public theology” immediately embraced by white-controlled academia as much more “acceptable” in a context where the realities of racism, white supremacy, white privilege and the power of (white) monopoly neo-liberal capitalism are considered far too radical to countenance.

fire, and nurtured by the suffering and the joys of fighting for truth, justice, and freedom endowed South African Black theology with a uniquely fashioned character. But being born into the bosom of resistance also brought with it a unique responsibility. From its inception, Black theology was held accountable, not so much to the rules and expectations of formal white controlled academia, but to the expectations, sufferings, and hopes of the people. Like American Black theology, South African Black theology is, so to speak, one of a set of historic triplets: Black Consciousness, Black theology and Black power.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on that first publication on Black theology in South Africa, Black theologians Itumeleng Mosala and Buti Thlagale write,

... The appearance of that book heralded the dawn of a new kind of black militancy: The struggle for the liberation of the oppressed and exploited black people was to be waged at all levels of the social formation. Christianity and the Christian church had up till this time served as the ideological tool for the softening up of black people and as a means by which black culture has been undermined ... Black people were, as of this time, to draw the liberation struggle to the very centre of capitalist ideology, namely, the Christian theological realm.<sup>11</sup>

To this day, academia in South Africa has not been able to rid itself of white, male, Euro-centric domination steeped in traditions, ways of theorizing and thinking, working with entitled assumptions, hopelessly trapped in a history of racist, colonialist, imperialist, apartheid framing, understanding and interpretation.<sup>12</sup> It is true of academia in general, but for the study of theology it is especially distressful. Hence the current battles for decolonization, Africanisation, and Africanicity in every sphere and at every level of academia, and these are always linked to continuing

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<sup>10</sup> See the first systematic attempt to make these vital connections, Allan Aubrey Boesak's 1976 doctoral dissertation, *Farewell to Innocence*. Notably, Steve Biko's contribution to South Africa's first anthology on Black theology, is actually an essay on Black Consciousness, see note 10 below.

<sup>11</sup> See Itumeleng Mosala and Buti Thlagale, *The Unquestionable Right to be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986, 74

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Simphiwe Sisanti, "Afrocentric Education for an African Renaissance, Philosophical Underpinnings", *New Agenda, South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy*, Issue 62, 2016, 34-40, and the quite vigorous response by Michael Nassen Smith and Tafadzwa Tivarange, "From Afro-Centrism to Decolonial Humanism and Afro-Plurality, A Response to Simphiwe Sisanti", 41-43.

struggles for dignity, integrity and authenticity within academia. In turn, these are inextricably interconnected with actual, daily, broader struggles of still-oppressed, still-marginalized, still-despised, excluded, and threatened communities. Staying close to the heart of these actual battles waged by the people is one vital requirement for the debates on Africanity, de-colonialisation and Africansation not to lose their way and be hopelessly co-opted by the power of the prevailing Euro-centric and Euro-centering forces, hence becoming just another site of capture serving only the interests of the powerful.

The first compendium of essays on Black theology in South Africa was produced by black South Africans, not a single one of them in academic positions.<sup>13</sup> They were not even all of them theologians. Take, for example, Steve Biko, whose article is considered by some to be the “best contribution to the book.”<sup>14</sup> Every single one of the authors were engaged in the struggle, fighting the might of the apartheid regime every day on the streets of confrontation. Their theology was a response to an ongoing history of genocide, dehumanization, dispossession, oppression and endless exploitation. It was a theology informed not by dogma, but by the cries and the suffering of the people. It was a theology not entrapped in philosophical speculations, European creedal disputes, and ethical theorising, but driven by the tenderness of conscience.<sup>15</sup> They were organic theologians, in the words of Antonio Gramsci, “active participants in practical life,” as “constructor, organiser, permanent persuader.”<sup>16</sup> They were listening to the hearts of the people, speaking to the hearts of the people from within the heart of the struggle. That is a gift theology confined

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<sup>13</sup> See Basil Moore, (ed.), *Black Theology, the South African Voice*, London: C. Hurst, 1973

<sup>14</sup> See editor Aeldryd Stubbs' introductory note to Biko's "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity" in *I Write What I Like*, 96

<sup>15</sup> See Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience*, especially ch. 7. The term is borrowed from Abraham Kuyper, *Six Stone Lectures*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1931, 123, in order to make the point from a black, Afro-centric view.

<sup>16</sup> See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971; Elecbook edition, London: 1999, 141-142.

to and constrained by academia - even in Black institutions - can only yearn for.

*That* Black liberation theology was called forth not by systematic formulations or the rules of academic acceptability but by the cry for freedom and the call to embodied commitment to the struggle for liberation. By the smell of teargas, the stripes inflicted by shamboks and the wounds inflicted by bullets; by the undeniable fear in the torture chamber and the indescribable loneliness of the isolation cell in prison. But it was equally shaped by the collective joy of a people knowing what it meant to stand for truth and freedom; by the contagiousness of courage, by the stubborn dreams of freedom that defied both hopelessness and sentimentalized optimism while giving despair no quarter. *That* Black theology was inspired by the power of the people's faith that denied resignation *its* power, and by the incredible resilience that comes from what Biko would call "the righteousness of our strength."<sup>17</sup>

Theirs was a theology born of a living faith, where their worship of God in the sanctuary continued in their worship of God in the streets of struggle. One could not call oneself a Black theologian and not be in the forefront of that struggle. The fires of rebellion set by the hopeful, righteous anger of the youthful masses were the external expression of what kept them close to the flaming heart of that revolution: the fire of righteous strength within themselves. And *that*, as Martin Luther King Jr. rejoiced, was "a fire that no water could put out."<sup>18</sup> That was what kept them real, and Black theology authentic.

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<sup>17</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 135-156. Biko uses this powerful expression on p152, but the whole chapter is well worth reading and pondering. For a more detailed, interpretative discussion of these words, see Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Side of the Blood-red Waters*, chapter 4

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther King Jr.'s last, utterly moving speech, delivered on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1968, the night before his assassination in Memphis Tennessee the next day, is usually referred to as "The Mountaintop Speech," a reference to King's poignant words now seen as foreseeing the possibility of his death. Those eerily prophetic words now dominate reflections on this speech. However, one should not lose sight of the many insights into the radical King in that very same speech, as this marvelous expression indicates. See Martin Luther King Jr., *The Radical King*, edited and with an Introduction by Cornel West, Boston: Beacon, 2015, 265-276.

## The Singularity of Blackness

Right from the outset, Black theology, as other expressions of liberation theology, feminist theologies, womanist theology and more recently queer theology, was defined, and understood, as a “contextual” theology. Unlike the claims of universality made by the dominant Euro-centric theologies, it grapples with the existential situations of black, oppressed people engaged in life and death struggles for liberation and justice, refusing to give up their faith in Jesus, their liberator/Messiah. We embraced that black experience in our struggle to embrace the Scriptures<sup>19</sup> and the significance of Jesus of Nazareth not just for the human story in general, but for the story of black humanity in confrontation with white, Christian, racist domination, exploitation, and oppression.

Black liberation icon and anti-colonialist fighter Aimé Césaire’s firm stance in his historic break with the French Communist Party was warmly appropriated by Steve Biko for the purposes of Black Consciousness in South Africa.<sup>20</sup> What Aimé Césaire demanded from us psychologically and politically, we had to embrace theologically as well, that we should “consciously grasp in its full breadth, in this specific moment of our historical evolution, the notion of our particular uniqueness” as black people:

One fact that is paramount in my eyes is this: we, men of color, [*sic*] at this precise moment in our historical evolution, have come to grasp, in our consciousness, the full breadth of our singularity, and are ready to assume on all levels and in all areas the responsibilities that flow from this coming to consciousness. The singularity of our “situation in the world,” which cannot be confused with any other.

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance, Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997, 28–35: “Thus the black experience requires that Scripture be a source for Black Theology. For it was Scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave masters” (my emphasis). Note that Cone emphasizes the agency of the slaves in their affirmation of God as a God of freedom and justice, over and against the appropriation of Scripture as inauthentic use of Scripture by the slave masters for the purposes of oppression and control. Again Cone: “Scripture established limits to white people’s use of Jesus Christ as a confirmation of black oppression.” Quotations are on 29. As is discussed in Allan Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah, Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition, and the Challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Empire*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019, ch. 1, this is a much contested issue, but I am in wholehearted agreement with Cone on this.

<sup>20</sup> See Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 72

The singularity of our problems, which cannot be reduced to any other problem. The singularity of our history, constructed out of terrible misfortunes that belong to no one else. The singularity of our culture, which we wish to live in a way that is more and more real.<sup>21</sup>

“Grasping the full breadth” of these realities means gaining a conscious and deliberate understanding, and making a decision, not only as individuals, but as an oppressed community in resistance; not only politically but socially; not only psychologically but theologically as well. We should, Cesairé insists, grasp “with our full consciousness”, not only the meaning and impact of “the terrible misfortunes that belong to no one else”, but also the responsibilities *that cannot belong to anyone else*. He means the responsibility to understand, analyse and interpret, to rise up in resistance, to actively engage the historical, social, economic, psychological, and political consequences of these “misfortunes” in full commitment of struggle for the sake of dignity, freedom, justice, and equity.

However, this “uniqueness”, this “peculiarity” is not to be confused with the “uniqueness” whites claimed for themselves as “God’s chosen people”, a claim made equally eloquently and fervently by English-speaking imperialists and white Afrikaner Calvinists, reflected in the chauvinistic certitude of that tireless imperialist Cecil John Rhodes who spoke of the British as “God’s ideal type, his own Anglo-Saxon race.”<sup>22</sup> Theirs was a peculiarity that demanded power and privilege at the expense of the humanity and right of existence of others. Neither is it the uniqueness that comes with unique rights appropriated in obliteration of the rights of others – the right to sacralised entitlement, dominion, and impunity. That, in turn, comes with a unique, and utterly deadly exceptionalism and innocence,

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<sup>21</sup> From his 1956 letter to Maurice Thorez, resigning from the French Communist Party after its failure to show remorse for, and condemn the atrocities committed by Stalin, and to admit the deadly existence of anti-semitism in “so many countries calling themselves socialist,” and its equally disastrous failure to recognise the distinctness of the anti-colonialist struggles of colonised peoples led by the colonised themselves. See *Social Text*, 103, Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer, 2010, 145-152. The citation is on 147.

<sup>22</sup> As cited in John De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 34. This “chosenness” claimed by white Afrikaner Calvinists based on their interpretation of the neo-Calvinist doctrine of “election” and “predestination” was a fundamental staple of the theology of apartheid.



such as we saw in white apartheid South Africa, and currently still rampant in white nationalist, imperialist America and, in equal, lethal measure, in the Zionist-Israeli apartheid state.

No, the peculiarity I have in mind following Cesairé, is the singularity of blackness as a *condition* of oppression, exploitation and subjugation, which, when the oppression is properly understood and oppressed people rise up to claim their dignity and freedom, is turned into a condition of resistance. It was not exclusivist, however. Whites who were ready to accept black leadership and share black aspirations, ready to share the risks of commitment, were invited to join the resistance, thereby “taking upon themselves the condition of blackness” so that the condition of freedom and equality would become the condition of all.<sup>23</sup> It is the peculiarity of Ubuntu, the constant and deliberate consciousness that my humanity is bound to the humanity of the other, that my humanity is validated by the humanity of the other, that I can only be what I ought to be when the other is what they ought to be. It is the unfettered joy in the spacious longing for oneness and never giving a single quarter to the suffocating clamourings for sameness. It is the responsibility to, as Biko put it, “take cognisance of the deliberateness of God’s plan in creating black people black.”<sup>24</sup>

For Africans in America, that singularity had to include their being kidnapped and sold, sometimes by their kinfolk; stolen from the lands of their birth, by white Christians, the horrors of the “middle passage,” enslavement in new lands by white Christians, and a life of discrimination, exploitation and dehumanization through a system called “Jim Crow.” Today, in my view, it should also include their determination to distinct themselves from the destructive omnipresence of the American empire, the

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<sup>23</sup> See Allan Aubrey Boesak, “The Black Church and the Future” in *Black and Reformed*, 84: “I speak of those whites who have understood their own guilt in the oppression of blacks in terms of corporate responsibility, who have genuinely repented and have been genuinely converted; those whites who have clearly committed themselves to the struggle for liberation and who, through their commitment, have taken upon themselves the *condition* of blackness in South Africa. In a real sense, they bear the marks of Christ. They have learned to identify with what blacks are doing to secure their liberation.” (emphasis original)

<sup>24</sup> *I Write What I Like*, 53

ideational enslavement of the romanticised “American dream” and the ideological subservience to American exceptionalism so tragically embraced by Barack Obama.<sup>25</sup>

For South African blacks, it had to include invasion of their lands by white Christians, genocide and enslavement, land theft on a scale unparalleled in modern history, and the same processes of dehumanisation and discrimination through a system called apartheid. It should also, I think, include the new struggle against a sentimentalised “liberation” and for the restoration of the integrity and authenticity of a hopelessly compromised reconciliation process.

These white Christians brought with them a faith called Christianity, the Christian Scriptures, and sets of beliefs and moral behavior that, so we were told, if we followed these, would bring us eternal salvation. It was made clear to us that for this salvation to occur, we had to follow *their* way of believing, accept *their* ways of interpreting the Scriptures, *their* ideas of God, *their* understanding of Jesus, *their* ways of experiencing the workings of God’s Holy Spirit. It did not take us long to understand just how closely our slave masters and their Christian missionaries identified themselves with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit so that obedience to our earthly masters was seen to be completely, even if completely blasphemously, synonymous with our obedience to God.

“No nation can win a battle without faith,” is a famous dictum of Steve Biko’s, and that battle begins with our refusal to “see God through the eyes of those we are fighting against,” those who oppress us in that same God’s name.<sup>26</sup> For Black South Africans, this had to include the fight against the heresies and ravages of something called “the theology of apartheid.” Biko then, bringing together struggle and faith in the way he did, saw no need

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<sup>25</sup> See Tariq Ali, *The Obama Syndrome: War Abroad, Surrender at Home*, London: Verso, 2010; see also Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Hope in Faith and Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014

<sup>26</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 64

for complex academic definitions of Black theology in order to satisfy white academia's requirements. He was not speaking to the academy. He was speaking to his people. For him, Black theology simply, and fundamentally, expressed the Black oppressed Christian's need to "describe Christ as a fighting God, not a passive God who allows the lie to rest unchallenged."<sup>27</sup>

### **The Need for a Fighting God**

At this point, we need perhaps to take a step or two back. When Biko first attempted to define Black theology, he put it thus:

Black theology seeks to depict Jesus as a fighting God who saw the exchange of Roman money – the oppressor's coinage – in His Father's temple as so sacrilegious that it merited a violent reaction from him – the Son of Man.<sup>28</sup>

So here, quite deliberately and specifically, Biko points to the revolutionary nature of Jesus' ministry on earth. This is the first image that comes up in his mind when he sees Jesus as a "fighting God." I have engaged with this Gospel passage in much greater detail before; here it is necessary only to remind ourselves of the central argument.<sup>29</sup> What Biko is stressing here, I think, is what has been a steadfast conviction in Black theology from the start, namely that Jesus of Nazareth was a revolutionary prophet from Roman-occupied Palestine, irrevocably on the side of the poor and oppressed fighting the Roman occupiers as well as their minions, the Jerusalem elites. That does not mean that he was a violent revolutionary. Keeping within the commitment to a non-violent revolution as Black Consciousness envisaged it, that would be a distortion.<sup>30</sup> Rather, it conveys that he was constantly and consistently engaging in what South African

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<sup>27</sup> *I Write What I Like*, 104

<sup>28</sup> *I Write What I Like*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> See Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, 145-46

<sup>30</sup> See *I Write What I Like*, 168: "Now the line that [the Black People's Convention] adopts is to explore as much as possible non-violent means within the country, *and that is why we exist* ... even though there are [many] people who have despaired of the efficacy of non-violence as a method." Emphasis mine. And on 169: "I don't believe for a moment that we are going to willingly drop our belief in the non-violent stance – as of now." Biko pointed out that he "could not predict the future." But in that future, the United Democratic Front reclaimed the militant, nonviolent traditions espoused by Albert Luthuli and the Black Consciousness Movement, and for the most part, despite incredible provocations, held steadfast to it.

radical Christian political leader Albert Luthuli, would call “non-violent militant resistance” to the Powers That Be in Jerusalem and in Rome.

According to the three synoptic Gospels, Jesus was “throwing over” the tables of the money changers, “pouring out” their money on the ground, and “driving out” those who were selling and buying. (Matt. 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 45-46) In the Gospel of John, Jesus also made a whip “from cords,” and drove “all of them,” that is, “both the sheep and the cattle” out of the temple, while he vented his outrage on those engaging in these businesses: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market place!” (Jhn 2:16) At no point, however, do the Gospels indicate that he engaged in acts of violence against any person present. And it was not a spontaneous, even improper eruption of emotion as some have sought to argue.<sup>31</sup> It was, in fact, an entirely proper act of revolutionary rejection of the normalisation of political and economic thuggery disguised as “religious custom” and “Law.” Hence Jesus’ scathing words consistent in all the synoptic Gospels, “den of robbers.”

In referring to Jesus’ actions in the temple compound that day, Biko would, I think, be in full agreement with Black theologian Obery Hendricks:

This is not a temper tantrum. No, this was no spontaneous eruption of emotion ... The Temple was the center of Israel’s economy, its central bank and treasury, the depository of immense wealth. Indeed so much of the activity of the Jerusalem Temple hinged upon buying and selling and various modes of exchange that it is no exaggeration to say that in a real sense the Temple was fundamentally an economic institution.<sup>32</sup>

The point is that Jesus is a revolutionary who goes to the temple “as a place of opposition, not to sacrifice but to disrupt.”<sup>33</sup> Here Jesus attacks not the temple as place of worship, but the temple as *the centre of*

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<sup>31</sup> See among others Andries van Aarde, *Fatherless in Galilee, Jesus as Child of God*, Harrisburg PA: Trinity International, 2001, 78. However, even though Van Aarde calls Jesus’ action an “emotional outburst”, he does argue that this act was so offensive, so revolutionary that it might have “led to Jesus’ death on the cross.”

<sup>32</sup> See Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus, Rediscovering the Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How they Have Been Corrupted*, New York: Doubleday, 2006, 113, 114.

<sup>33</sup> See Allan Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, 145

*economic power* where the poor is squeezed for all they have in the name of God, but for the benefit of the temple elites and the rich and powerful. (Mark 12:41-44) Jesus' going to the temple that day was not a simple, random act. He was going there for a purpose, and that purpose was to make a revolutionary point about God, the temple, the powerful, and the customs, rules, and traditions that kept the people captive and subjugated. The cleansing of the temple falls within the context of Jesus' triumphal entry into the Jerusalem, as a direct, oppositional, revolutionary counter-act to the entry of the Roman Governor and his troops, a "pre-arranged counter-procession,"<sup>34</sup> causing "turmoil" in the city and havoc in the temple.

Black theology has no reason to disagree with William Herzog II when he writes of Jesus' parables as "subversive speech":

If [Jesus] had been the kind of teacher popularly portrayed in the North American church, a master of the inner life, teaching the importance of spirituality and a private relationship with God, he would have been supported by the Romans as part of their rural pacification program. That was exactly the kind of religion the Romans wanted peasants to have. Any beliefs that encouraged magic, passivity before fate, and withdrawal from the world of politics and economics into a spiritual or inner realm would have met with official approval. Had Jesus' parables indulged in apocalyptic speculation or threatened the end of the world, he would have been watched, but left alone. The Eastern Empire had its share of astrologers and visionaries. Had he merely proclaimed any or all of the themes ascribed to him by Joachim Jeremias, he would have inspired arguments but not malice. Had he anticipated narrativity and metaphoricity, he would have been remarkable but not crucified. Narrativity and metaphoricity were not capital crimes in the Roman Empire, and the one thing about Jesus that can be known with certainty was that he was executed as an enemy of the state and the Temple. He was crucified between two "social bandits" (*Iestes*) on the charge of subversion because he claimed to be 'king of the Jews.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week, What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, New York: Harper Collins, 2006, 3-5; also Allan Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, 143-45

<sup>35</sup> See William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech, Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, n.d., 27

Consequently, we believe Obery Hendricks to be quite correct in the clarity of this observation:

To say that Jesus was a political revolutionary is to say that the message he proclaimed not only called for change in individual hearts but also demanded sweeping and comprehensive change in political, social, and economic structures in his setting in life: colonized Israel. It means that if Jesus had his way, the Roman Empire and the ruling elites among his own people either would no longer have held their positions of power, or if they did, would have had to conduct themselves very, very differently. It means that his ministry was to radically change the distribution of authority, power, goods and resources, so all people – particularly the little people, or “the least of these”, as Jesus called them – might have lives free of political oppression, enforced hunger and poverty, and undue insecurity.<sup>36</sup>

That is what Black theology means in its search for Jesus as a fighting God.

### **Not Allowing the Lie to Rest Unchallenged**

Black theology’s Black Messiah is a fighting God who would not let the lie “rest unchallenged” says Biko in his expansion of his definition. Since all oppression begins with lies, the revolution of this fighting God begins with exposing and challenging the lie. It is for this reason that Jesus’ confrontation with the tempter, the “father of all lies,” (Jn. 8:44), is placed so early in the synoptic gospels.<sup>37</sup> (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13) In Luke, (4:1-13) it comes even before the scene in the temple where Jesus announces his manifesto, (4:18-19): No, it is not true that food security for oneself is the key to life. And no, it is not true that God is available to our every foolish whim – that is a vainglorious presumption that reeks of arrogance and obsession with power. And no, it is not in your power to “give” me “all the kingdoms of the world.” The powers of this world are illegitimate, driven by violence, greed and desires for domination. They are already doomed to

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<sup>36</sup>*The Politics of Jesus*, 5. On Jesus as social and political revolutionary, see Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire, The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003, 103

<sup>37</sup> See for a more detailed discussion of this, Allan Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, 136-137

perdition. God is the true Ruler of this world, I am God's anointed, and God's reign is at hand.

Challenging, confronting, and exposing those lies is the first point on the agenda, and that sets the framework for understanding the enormity and intensity of the battles that lie ahead. But now we know that exposing the lie and refuting the liar is the beginning of God's revolution.

However, exposing and challenging the lie in order to find, and stand for the truth that shall make us free, calls for the engagement of struggle. Our theology, therefore, would be a theology for the struggle, our spirituality a spirituality of struggle.<sup>38</sup> It is the spirituality that allows us to bow our knees in fear and trembling before God, so that we do not ever have to bow or tremble before any earthly power.

For Black liberation theology on both sides of the ocean we were clear on who should define that struggle. Said Albert Luthuli, "The struggle would be for freedom, justice and human dignity and there could be no substitute: we are bent on liberation."<sup>39</sup> And again, "Our struggle is a struggle and not a game."<sup>40</sup>

Luthuli's sober warning left us with no illusions:

We shall not win our freedom except at the cost of great suffering, and we must be prepared to accept it. Much African blood has already been spilt, and assuredly more will be. ... We do not desire to shed the blood of the white man; but we should have no illusion about the price he will exact in African blood before we are admitted to citizenship in our own country.<sup>41</sup>

Getting clarity on these vital issues was indispensable for Black theology as we stood on the threshold of that decisive, life-changing era. At the heart of Black theology is the firm conviction that Jesus of Nazareth

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<sup>38</sup> See Allan Aubrey Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience*, ch. 7

<sup>39</sup> Luthuli, *Let My People Go, The Autobiography of Albert Luthuli*, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2006, 147

<sup>40</sup> *Let My People Go*, 124

<sup>41</sup> Luthuli, *Let My People Go!*, 148

belonged historically in a situation of oppression, that he was a member of an oppressed people, living in occupied Palestine, and that he came to set his people free. (Lk. 4:16-18) Right from the start we grappled with the question: what would it look like if we understood the true revolutionary nature of these words and took them seriously not just for our comfort or survival, but for our decision not to accept the condition of oppression and dehumanization forced upon us?

It is thus within this context we must understand Biko's declaration that Black theology seeks "Christ as a fighting God, not a passive God who allows a lie to rest unchallenged." We are here not speaking of the life-preserving lie that Biko cautions elsewhere Black theology should not treat as a mortal sin such as the lies to the police of an illegitimate state enforcing oppressive laws when one has forgotten or lost one's Pass book. Nor should it count as a lie when a mother refuses to tell the truth to Security Police when another mother's son is hiding in her house, 3ven though she is endangering her and her family's lives for the sake of saving the life of another. Those are life-preserving "lies" like the lies told to the Nazi's by extraordinary courageous German and Dutch resisters who kept Jews in hiding in their homes during the horrors of Nazi reign. Those persons are rightly called "righteous." Those life-preserving "lies" should not be called "lies" at all. These are truths that should be kept from being revealed to oppressive, murderous regimes whose systemic, inherent mendacity does not deserve a truth they will only use for the purposes of undeserved death.

Neither are we speaking of the expedient lie politicians tell for some short-term nefarious purpose. Journalist and prophetic social critic Chris Hedges speaks of the expedient lie as "the falsehoods and half-truths uttered by politicians such as Bill Clinton [on NAFTA], George W. Bush [on Iraq] and Barack Obama [on the Pacific Trade Agreement]." <sup>42</sup> These lies were "common political lies ... a form of manipulation." However, we should

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<sup>42</sup> See Chris Hedges, "The Permanent Lie, Our Deadliest Threat" Truthdig, December 17, 2017, [truthdig.com/articles/permanent-lie-deadliest-threat](http://truthdig.com/articles/permanent-lie-deadliest-threat).



keep in mind that the lies about the nonexistent Weapons of Mass Destruction told by George W. Bush and Tony Blair to justify their invasion of Iraq while that invasion was in fact about imperial lust and ambition, expansion of spheres of power and the purposes of neo-liberal capitalism: robbing Iraq of its oil reserves. Those were unabashed expressions of imperial arrogance, greed, and lawlessness. Even though, as Hedges correctly observes, these lies served a particular moment of “cover-up” and need no repetition after having served their purpose (for those politicians), we should keep in mind that all of these lies have lasting, and devastating, consequences.

Now, so many years later, says Hedges, one does not find either Blair or Bush going around the world still telling those lies of justification. They are more likely to simply remain silent about them, ignoring those lies, hoping the world would forget. The truly vulgar truth is that, because these powerful men from powerful Western countries, all of them white apart from Barack Obama, will not be held accountable as the war criminals they are. The world is quite willing to look the other way, its eyes fixed on the next African dictator and war criminal they can haul before the International Criminal Court.

The “permanent lie” Chris Hedges argues, is the lie not told as political expediency, to cover the true reasons for a momentary justification of the essentially unjustifiable, just until the world can “move on.” The permanent is different because it is perpetrated “even in the face of overwhelming evidence that discredits it.” It is “irrational”, argues Hedges. “The permanent lie is the apotheosis of totalitarianism.” Hedges is primarily, and understandably, concerned with the situation in the United States and its reigning political class, especially in what has become known as “the era of Trump” where they “no longer play by any rules.”

Hedges is not wrong. However, our responsibility goes deeper. Again looking through Global South eyes, as colonised and re-colonised peoples under imperial domination, we would have to ask: “What rules?” The

empire's rules have always been the rules that benefited the empire, guaranteed its domination, trivialized its savagery, justified its crimes, maximized its profits, normalised its mendacity, sacralised its violence. For us, Hedges' "no longer" has no meaning. We have lived, and are even now living caught up in the actualities and the consequences of the permanent lie. Imperialist totalitarianism as imperialist terrorism, and imperial mendacity, have been with us from the first moments of the invasion of our lands.

So, following the lead of Aimé Césaire, we stand by the singularity of our black, oppressed, colonized, re-colonised situation. For us, the permanent lie is told as an eternal inversion of the truth, as justification not of one moment of political crisis for the powerful, but rooted in, inextricable from, and indispensable for the permanent justification of permanent imperial structures of domination and subjugation. It is the insidious, pernicious, pervasive lie presented as scientific fact, historical "inevitable", philosophical self-evident conclusions, and theological indisputabilities parading as divine truth, intended to sacralise permanent systems of oppression and exploitation. It is the lie we see in the workings of colonialism, post-colonial realities, re-colonisation and perpetual imperialism. Permanent mendacity is the empire's life-blood.<sup>43</sup>

Hedges does not believe we should give up. There is a remedy for this situation: We must resist, he says, "we must pit power against power." That is exactly what Black Consciousness, Black power, and Black theology set out to do. From the beginning, we recognised that all oppressions begin with the permanent lie.

What lies? About Black people and white people, beginning with those fundamental, foundational lies we were expected to believe about ourselves, forced upon our minds, drilled into our consciousness, and seared into our flesh.

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<sup>43</sup> See Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope?* 55-65; and Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, 27

The lie that whiteness was the epitome of goodness, civility, and rightness, and that blackness was darkness in body, in mind, in spirit, and in soul; less worthy, less trustworthy, less deserving, less human - *that lie*. The lie perpetrated by respected European scholars, scientists, theologians and philosophers held in the highest regard as the uppermost echelons of European scholarship. So naturally, we hear the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel from his lofty heights, his dark, intellectualised racism, and unfathomable *Abendland* arrogance, pronouncing his judgements of us from thousands of miles away:

If you want to understand [the Negro] rightly, you must abstract all elements of respect and morality and sensitivity [for] there is nothing remotely humanized in the Negro's character ... Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world, shut up. It is ... that land of childhood, which, lying beyond the days of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night<sup>44</sup>

*That lie.*

No wonder American theologian Joel Goza calls Europe and its Renaissance philosophers "the original crime scene where ... America's ideologies were first crafted, and where we can begin to understand our ongoing addiction to racist ideas, institutions and ways of life."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, cited in Bernard Magubane, "The African Renaissance in Historical Perspective," in B. Magubane (ed.), *African Renaissance, the New Struggle*, Cape Town: Tafelberg, and Sandton: Mafube, 1999, 24, 25. Recently, Joel Goza has published a fascinating analysis of the ideational roots of American racism. Goza makes us not only understand the current racist realities of the United States of America, but also where these come from, and how they have been solidified by practical political engineering, intellectual, scientific and philosophical endeavour, and religious manipulation. Goza's analysis of America's most beloved and revered philosophers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and (the later interpretations of) Adam Smith is careful and relentless. He convincingly shows how the "enlightened thinking" of these philosophers is exposed "through the work taking place in the bodies of Africans and Indians" then and still today. His take on Darwin is instructive: "Though Darwin is two centuries away, the very title of his masterpiece displays the racialized edge of scientific rationality. Though we know his masterpiece under the title *The Origins of Species*, Darwin originally did not; for he entitled the book *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or by Means of Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). Goza concludes, "The theory of evolution was part of the project of articulating the origins of white superiority." Joel Edward Goza, *America's Unholy Ghosts, The Racist Roots of Our Faith and Politics*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019, 43.

<sup>45</sup> *America's Unholy Ghosts*, 29

The lies about history – that South Africa’s history began in 1652 and that the Dutch colonisers found here a *terra nullius*, an empty land making it clear that those who had lived here for thousands of years did not count, because it was inconceivable that “savages” could be counted as people with a right to existence, or life, or land.

That the Europeans who came here were sent by God to settle a savage, untamed land in a dark continent and bring the light of the Gospel to heathen who knew nothing about God – *that lie*.

Those lies about the Bible – that it justified colonization, land theft, oppression, genocide, slavery, exploitation, and apartheid, and sanctified and sacralised white supremacy.

About apartheid – that it was God’s will, that it was the only “Christian” solution to South Africa’s “race problem” – a problem which they – not God, and not us - created; and that the people who created the problem also had the right to prescribe to blacks the solution to the problem.

I am speaking of the lie perpetrated by apartheid church leaders such as the Dutch Reformed Church’s Dr Koot Vorster, that most vigorous proponent of sacralised whiteness, apartheid, and the theology that came to bear its name:

Our only guide is the Bible. Our policy and outlook on life are based on the Bible. We firmly believe the way we interpret it is right. We will not budge one inch from our interpretation [in order] to satisfy anyone in South Africa or abroad.... We are right and will continue to follow the way the Bible teaches.<sup>46</sup>

In making apartheid God’s will they conferred upon that evil system salvific qualities, as if not God’s love, grace, and power through Jesus Christ was our salvation but apartheid, which means racial separation, white superiority, white supremacy, and white *Baasskap* – *that lie*.

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<sup>46</sup> *Sunday Times*, 8 November, 1970, cited in Charles Villia-Vicencio, “An All-pervading Heresy: Racism and the English-speaking Churches”, in Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. De Gruchy, (eds.), *Apartheid is a Heresy*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1983, 59.

About God – that God is a willful, unashamed, white, racist, insatiable robber of land and life; a slaveholding, misogynistic, mendacious, patriarchal, homophobic, genocidal, infanticidal maniac – *that lie*.

That that God has a chosen people, white people, to whom God has given the right to rule, and oppress, together with the right to impunity, so that whatever they did was eternally excusable on earth and unreservedly forgivable in heaven – *that lie*.

The lie that in order to love Jesus and be his followers, Black people must revere white people, obey them, call them “*Baas*” and “*Miesies*”, never complain because that would be ungrateful, and therefore unchristian. That, in order to be acceptable to and loved by God, we were obliged to bend to oppression, humiliation and dehumanization as our God-willed and irrevocable earthly condition.

The lie that we were compelled to embrace slavery and be grateful for it, because it is ultimately for our benefit. So argued, amongst many others, the early nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed Church missionary Rev. M. C. Vos, in his passionate plea to slave-owners to allow their slaves to receive religious instruction from white missionaries. The enslaved, he wrote, might have been happy with their “dear families” in the lands from which they were stolen; but if they are taught that “the things which seem unbearable to us are the will of God for our good;” indeed, if they had not been brought to this “Christian country” and made slaves, they never would have heard of “the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and on dying would be lost forever.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Rev. Vos’ argument to slave owners to allow their slaves religious instruction, Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 83-84, there discussed as a prime example of religion in the service of ideology. But see also B.A. Zuiddam of South Africa’s North West University’s vigorous defence of De Vos’ pure Christian motivations: “M.C. Vos, A Remarkable Story! (1759-1824) in the light of his times,” *In die Skriflig, In Luce Verbi*, 46 (2), art.#56, 12 pages. DOI:10.4102/ids.v46:2.56. Note that Zuiddam’s first task, as prioritised in the Abstract already, is to prove De Vos’ whiteness. He stresses that “there is no genealogical warrant to treat Vos as something else than a White, European minister and writer.” So with the purity of Vos’ white, European, racial credentials settled, Zuiddam then argues for the purity of his Christian credentials: “The real motivation for Vos’ missionary endeavours was not racial, but spiritual.” Foremost in Vos’ mind, Zuiddam contends, was “the promotion of the Gospel [among the enslaved] and knowledge of the Scriptures [by the enslaved].” For Vos, as glowingly approved

That unqualified exceptionalism and eternal innocence are divinely ordained attributes gifted by God to the empire and its ruling classes, justification for what Joel Goza calls “the final political and the final religious lie” namely that “justice is retributive rather than restorative ... and that indifference to injustice is no threat to one’s intimacy with God.”<sup>48</sup>

*Those lies.*

That a society built on the foundations of invasion, racism, slavery, land theft, the genocide and dehumanization of the indigenes, and the decimation of Black personhood should be acceptable to oppressed people, and not in need of profound, relentless, revolutionary challenge and transformation.

The lies that in order to survive in the world of white power, white supremacy and white privilege we must embrace internalized revilement and perpetual psychological trauma by despising ourselves, our culture, our history, and strive toward whiteness, or as close to whiteness as we could get or be allowed to get, in an eternal quest of white people’s approval.<sup>49</sup>

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by Zuiddam almost two centuries later, slavery was not an issue at all, since the benefits of getting to know Christ were so great. It goes without saying that slave-holding America had similar views on slavery and the benefits of religious instruction, of which the work of Charles Colcock Jones (1804-1863), *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse, 1842, is arguably one of the best examples. Beginning with “[The Negroes] are the most dependent of all people upon us for the word of life,” he goes on to stipulate the benefits accrued from religious instruction. Even though the “pecuniary benefits of Masters” is high on his list of six, the most important benefit is for the enslaved: “The souls of our servants would be saved ...” See <https://docsouth.unc.edu>. Theologian Joel Goza makes the same point when he quotes American philosopher John Locke, as Locke argues for the beneficial value of Poor Houses for children of the poor, lower classes “above the age of three.” Locke recommends that they be “soundly whipped” if their enthusiasm for work failed to meet the expectations of their overseers. Locke - the “father of liberalism” as Goza calls him - wrote, “By this means the mother will be eased of a great part of her trouble in looking after and providing for them at home, and so be at the more liberty to work; the children will be kept in much better order, be better provided for, and from infancy be inured to work.” See Goza, *America’s Unholy Ghosts*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> *America’s Unholy Ghosts*, 106

<sup>49</sup> See Frantz Fanon’s unsurpassed treatment of these questions in his classic *Black Skin White Masks*, (Transl. Charles Lam Markmann). One gets an idea of the relevance of Fanon’s thinking as it is embraced by students in South Africa’s 2015 “#RhodesMustFall protests and the way the protests were reported by mainstream media. Nicola Bidwell’s analysis is highly instructive: “‘A feeling of inferiority?’ asks Frantz Fanon, in his essay “The Fact of Blackness.” ‘No,’ he says, ‘a feeling of nonexistence.’ Recently, South African students protesting for #Rhodes Must Fall joined a succession of liberation movements referencing Fanon over the past 50 years. Among many creative acts, students wore placards that read ‘recognize me.’ Mainstream media reported protests at formerly exclusively white universities most extensively; they also tended to portray protesting students at majority black universities as prone to violence—woeful evidence of Fanon’s contemporary significance to race identity politics

The lie that courts of law set up by white Christian invaders are sacred spaces of civilization, even if those laws are made and enacted for the sole purpose of justifying the vilest acts of white supremacy, from decriminalising willful murder and racial bigotry to criminalising interracial love, a law prompting black South African poet Adam Small's riveting and still-haunting question: "Whose law? God's law? Man's law? Devil's law?"<sup>50</sup>

The lies that make white, racist judges the sole, respected, and unquestionable arbiters of the law, even when they declare that a black person "has no rights a white man is bound to respect," as pronounced by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney in 1857.<sup>51</sup> Or, for that matter, that land theft, because it is "legalized" by an act of an unrepresentative, illegitimate, minority white parliament, has both legal and moral authority, and that Black people, in order to be considered "law-abiding" should accept those immoral "legal" positions and their devastating consequences without question.

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in education. His relevance to HCI, specifically, is simply illustrated by image searches using Google.com.na. Only two of the first 50 people in photos returned for 'person using computer' are black unless the special filter category 'black' is used. There is no filter for 'white,' but there are categories for 'work,' 'office,' 'icon,' and so on. Indeed, the black man is an 'object in the midst of other objects,' 'black in relation to the white man,' Fanon writes, and 'has no ontological resistance.' (Searches for 'person with computer' using one of the languages in the country where I live, 'nakulongifa okomputa,' do not yet yield any image results.)" See Nicola Bidwell, "Black Skin, White Masks", repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle\_Black\_2016,pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

<sup>50</sup> Adam Small, "What abou' de lô?" ("What About The Law?"), a shatteringly poignant poem about an interracial couple whose love for each other fell foul of South Africa's racial laws, and who finally committed suicide rather than being kept apart by those laws, a not uncommon situation in apartheid South Africa. See netwerk24/Vermaak/Feeste.what-abou-de-lo-deur-adam-small-20160609.

<sup>51</sup> The consequences of that infamous "Dred Scott decision," argues legal scholar Walter Johnson, are impacting African Americans to this day and are an excellent example of yet another element of "the permanent lie." Johnson writes, "When Dred Scott filed his case in the Missouri Courts in 1846, he was on good legal footing ..." The principal issue at stake however, was not the strength of his legal argument, but the question of whether Dred Scott had any right to sue in the first place. That right, the court found, was "the sole prerogative of the citizens of the United States, and Scott, being black, was not one." In the view of the Court, he was "of an inferior order and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Johnson calls it "ten of the most notorious words in the history of the United States." Arguably, the next thirteen words would prove just as devastating, and today resounds in the manifold ways of modern slavery: "... That the negro might justly and rightfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit." (See n37 above). Most pertinent to our discussion though, is Johnson's conclusion: "More than a century after the Dred Scott decision argued that black people lived in Missouri by the grace of white people," Johnson writes in 2017, "we are seeing the outline of an actually existing police state." See Walter Johnson. "No Rights."

The lie that being a good Christian means believing that fighting against oppression and exploitation is futile, impossible and sinful, for rebellion against the white power structure is *ipso facto* rebellion against God. Accepting the fact that while embracing apartheid might make you a good Christian, it will never make you a citizen in the country of your birth. Simultaneously however, racism's logic makes the point moot: a good Black Christian did not need citizenship on earth, because white people will provide all you need, and in any case Blacks are not deemed responsible enough to have it. Your citizenship is not on earth but in heaven. Only white people needed both. *Those lies.*

The fact that Western, Euro-centric theology presents itself as universal, its presuppositions as self-evident truths, and its assumptions as unassailable scientific facts, is the result of objective study, inevitable social Darwinism, and divine entitlement, and not embedded in white supremacy, white power, and white privilege.

That is why we need a fighting God: to not let these lies rest unchallenged.

However, exposing the lie means struggle, for we understood that power is never given up voluntarily by the oppressor. Rather – as we have learnt from Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli - it has to be wrenched from their hands. Power concedes nothing without a demand *and it never will*; but the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Pretending that a struggle was not necessary or that there was no struggle already going on, was a lie. So was pretending that fighting oppression was not a duty for those who believed in a just, compassionate God.

So with Black Consciousness, Black theology and Black power and our belief in Jesus as a fighting God, the prophetic church in South Africa, by the grace of God, was able to carve for itself a role of great honour in the



struggle for freedom and justice. The young generation of the 1976 uprisings and the multi-generational, multi-racial, multi-faith masses in the Campaigns of Defiance and resistance of the 1980s made “ungovernability” a reality for the apartheid regime. We won the decisive battle for international political solidarity in terms of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions.

We dismantled the barricades of Christianised, international white solidarity, overcame the ideologically inspired theological resistance to declare apartheid a sin and its theological justification a heresy, thereby destroying South African white Christianity’s pseudo-innocence and apartheid’s pretense of political morality. We stormed the gates of official apartheid a final time, and won. We had learnt to become, what Steve Biko called a generation of “selfless revolutionaries.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Not a “Theology of Absolutes”.**

Finally, we must consider something else Biko added to his understanding of Black theology, and it is, in my view, of crucial importance. Black theology, he writes, “does not claim to be a theology of absolutes.”<sup>53</sup> As far as I can tell, Biko is the only one to describe Black theology thus. On the face of it, Biko’s words sound somewhat obvious. After all, Black liberation

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<sup>52</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 241. The fact that this revolution has been hijacked by the exiles-dominated African National Congress and turned into a neo-imperialistic tool for the re-colonisation of a democratic South Africa is a tragedy discussed elsewhere, see e.g. Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition, From Apartheid to Neo-Liberalism in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2002; Sampie Terreblanche, *Lost in Translation, South Africa’s Search for a New Future Since 1986*, Johannesburg: KMM Review Publishing Company, 2012; Allan Boesak, *Pharaohs on Both Sides*. The judgement of South Africa’s younger generation is blunt, and brutal: “The ANC of first century Jerusalem (the religious establishment) was folding under pressure exerted by the Roman powers because they’d never had the moral backbone to resist plundering their own people alongside their oppressors.” See Siya Kumalo, *You Have to be Gay to Know God*, Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2018, 271

<sup>53</sup> *I Write What I Like*, 104. This does not mean that Black theology does not recognise foundational truths: that God is a personal God, first and foremost a God of total liberation and indivisible justice, who chooses the side of the poor, the oppressed, and the defenceless; that Jesus of Nazareth was sent as God’s anointed one, a revolutionary prophet who battled against the Roman empire and its minions in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem elites, in occupied Palestine, and that the Holy Spirit assures us of God’s presence, empowering an emboldening us to work for the coming of God’s reign in this world and in the age to come. But holding onto these foundational truths is not the same as clinging to absolutes.

theology is, by its very nature, an *ecumenical* theology. Denominationalism would play no role, except where denominations were regarded as particular sites of struggle. Denominationalism was, as was apartheid's racial categorising, seen as part of the "divide-and-rule" strategies of the ruling classes. "What divided white South African Christians, and conversely what united blacks and whites *in Christ*, however significant both might have been, was never significant enough to break the bonds of common white interests."<sup>54</sup>

But even as far back as 1883 S.N. Mvambo had perceived that white solidarity is not hindered by either language, ethnicity, or denominational affiliation:

In fighting for national rights, we must fight together. Although they look as if they belong to different churches, the white people are solidly united when it comes to matters of this nature. We blacks think that these churches are hostile to one another, and in that way we lose our political rights.<sup>55</sup>

We now understand much better, despite its enormous impact on the history of the church and the world, how little difference the Reformation fundamentally made to the real life situations of oppressed peoples.<sup>56</sup> Understanding all this also meant that Black theology was not hampered by the battles around creeds and dogmas, the throne-and-altar wars that so besieged and besmirched European Christendom. Neither could we be bothered to spend too much time on those all-consuming arguments about Transubstantiation and Consubstantiation; or about election, predestination, or white Calvinism's beloved TULIP dogmatic strifes.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience*, 138-139, emphasis original.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 51

<sup>56</sup> It was Helmut Gollwitzer whose observations in this regard sparked new understandings of this issue in Black theological debates. "For the white confessors of the faith," Gollwitzer wrote in part, "regardless of their particular Christian hue, the people of colour were all destined for bondage; 'oneness in Christ' might pertain to heaven, but certainly not on this earth." See Helmut Gollwitzer, "Why Black Theology?" in Gayraud Wilmore and James H. Cone, *Black Theology, A Documentary History*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 155. For a detailed discussion on this issue see Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, Ch 1, especially 1-8

<sup>57</sup> Formulated amidst fierce debates and expulsions of some at the Reformed Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), and even the beheading of one Johan Vanoldenbarneveldt some time later, TULIP is an acronym for humanity's "Total depravity," God's "Unconditional election," Christ's "Limited atonement," God's "Irresistible grace" and

Certainly not while all these doctrinal battles made no difference whatsoever to the life situations of the indigenous peoples these same white Christians oppressed, enslaved and killed. James Cone spoke for all of us:

While not diminishing the importance of Luther's theological concern, I am sure that if he had been born a black slave, his first question would not have been whether Jesus was present at the Lord's Table, but whether he was really present at the slave's cabin, whether slaves could expect Jesus to be with them as they tried to survive the cotton field, the whip, and the pistol.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, one could not have "black solidarity" and "the community of the black oppressed" as Black Consciousness demanded in the political arena, and have a denominationally-splintered theological arena.

One must keep in mind as well, that Black liberation theology in South Africa is an *African* expression of Black theology. In that sense, shunning absolutes was essential. Moreover, it had no wish to separate itself completely from African Theology, even though it must be said that the relationship was not always an easy one. It is true that the older, more conservative generation of African theologians had some trouble with Black theology: its proud use of the term "Black", its unabashed political engagement and belief in political resistance to structures of oppressive power, and its critical stance to some aspects of African culture. Desmond Tutu has endeavoured to engage with these issues.<sup>59</sup> But as South African

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God's "Preservation of the Saints." Black theologians from the Reformed tradition totally ignored white Calvinists' obsessions with these matters. Their concern was to discover John Calvin's bold and entirely persuasive theology of social justice, which instead they saw as the essence of Calvin's theology and the Reformed tradition, see e.g. Allan Boesak's *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984, and his *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge of Prophetic Resistance*, New York: Palgrave, 2015, ch. 1, as well as his *Tenderness of Conscience*, ch.7.

<sup>58</sup> See James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997, 13

<sup>59</sup> See Hans Engdahl, "The Black Atlantic as reversal: A reappraisal of African and black theologies", *HTS Theological Studies*, vol.73, no.3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73.n3.4618> See Desmond Tutu, "Black Theology/African Theology: Soul Mates or Antagonists?" Gayraud Wilmore and James H Cone (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979, 483-491. The tensions, already reflected in the title Tutu gave his contribution, were not completely overcome. John Mbiti, for instance, continued to view Black theology as a specifically American phenomenon, a consequence of enslavement in America, a judgement on American Christianity. It had nothing to do with Africa, its ongoing state of neo-colonisation, the continent's

theologian Rothney Tshaka, has recently pointed out, the questions of liberation and inculturation need not be mutually exclusive, in fact, “two sides of the same coin,” neatly bridging the gap between the older and younger generations on this issue.<sup>60</sup>

Even more importantly though, not being a theology of absolutes means that Black theology is a living theology, not a closed system of sacralised, dogmatised ideologies. It is a theology critical of systems of oppression and capable of self-critique. Black theology is as unsparing in its critique of the black situation as a result of systems of white power, white racism and white capitalist exploitation, as it is of white Christianity. By the same token, however, it is as critical of black people’s complicity in their own oppression. I consider this a crucial point, for authentic revolutionary understanding does not allow for oppression-minded entitlements: self-destructive self-pity, self-righteous victimhood, and self-deluding innocence. Hence Biko’s brutal honesty about Black people as he speaks about “the first truth, as bitter as it may seem”:

Reduced to an obliging shell, [the Black person] looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the inevitable ‘position.’ Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he vents it in the wrong direction – on his fellow man in the township, on the property of black people. No longer does he trust leadership, for the 1963 mass arrests were blameable on bungling by the leadership, nor is there any to trust. 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 blame himself for not having been ‘educated’ enough to warrant such luxury. Celebrated achievements by whites in the field of science – which he

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enforced submission to American imperialism, the oppression and exploitation of its peoples by ruthless leaders, and certainly not as a call to engagement by African theologians. See Mbiti, “An African Views American Black Theology”, in Wilmore and Cone, (eds.), *Black Theology*, 477-482. For many of us it was clear that Mbiti never really understood, or accepted, Black theology, and his condescension did not help: “I understood the reason for their bitterness, their anger and their hatred all if which comes through in their Black Theology”, see *An African View*, 481. In 2013, at a conference at the University of the Western Cape, I shared the speaker’s stage with John Mbiti, and the tensions were still palpable.

<sup>60</sup> See Rothney Tshaka, “How Can a Conquered People Sing Praises of Their History and Culture? Africanisation as the Integration of Inculturation and Liberation”, *Black Theology, An International Journal*, 14 (2016) 91-106

understands only hazily – serve to make him rather convinced of the futility of resistance and to throw away any hopes that change may ever come. *All in all, the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery; a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.* <sup>61</sup>

“This,” Biko writes, “is what we have to acknowledge before we can start on any programme designed to change the status quo.” As with his blistering critique of the Black church,<sup>62</sup> Biko understood that when liberation is at stake, this is the kind of honest, self-critical understanding that is required. Without this, a revolution has no integrity, no authenticity, and no genuine hope to offer. This is what I mean by a theology that does not embrace absolutes.

It is a theology capable of evolving, with an openness to embrace changing situations, to the necessity of learning and unlearning, to hear, and respond to the voices of oppressed and suppressed communities and persons, even, and especially, those long suppressed in our own midst. It is a theology of freedom. Inasmuch as Black theology fights for the freedom of the oppressed, it claims the right of freedom for itself.

As a theology of freedom and not of absolutes, Black theology clings to the fundamental message of Luke chapter 4, but it has the freedom to learn the wider understandings of liberation: freedom for *all* captives, including those held in the captivity of gender-based injustices and inequalities. Liberation of *all* the oppressed, including those oppressed by the hatreds of bigotry, homophobia, and transphobia. The healing of *those*

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<sup>61</sup> *I Write What I Like*, 31-32, emphasis added. I would not employ Biko’s male exclusivist language today, but it is an important pointer to those matters Black theology has to acknowledge and unlearn, and to the openness of a non-absolutist theology I am speaking about.

<sup>62</sup> *I Write What I Like*, 58-65. From one point of view, one may read the title of Biko’s book as some saucy, even taunting thumbing-of-the-nose at the white power structures: writing what he liked even when he was banned by the apartheid regime and prohibited from writing anything for publication, albeit under a pseudonym. It’s what Black Americans would call “sass.” He is laughing in the face of the mightiest government on the continent. But within this context it becomes clear that Biko knew what risks he was taking: how dare he speak in such a way to a people already crushed by oppression, vilification, and self-doubt? How hard would it be for us Blacks to really accept “this first truth”, and how much easier to ignore it and reject Biko? Still, he understood God’s word to Ezekiel: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” (Ezek.2:5)

broken-hearted, those hearts broken not only by a hard-hearted society, but by African cultural distortions totally void of the Ubuntu we proclaim; not simply by a hypocritical church in general, but by a hetero-patriarchal, hetero-normative black church in particular. A theology that shuns absolutes will repent of our own patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia and racism, of our own excess of love for neo-liberal capitalism even while paying lip service to the God of the poor and the destitute.

Finally, in the new and exciting debates raging about Africanisation, Africinity, and decolonization Black theology has to be ready to firmly take its stand and make its contribution. In my most recent work, I have made the argument as follows.<sup>63</sup>

The struggles for authentic Africinity are firmly rooted within the struggles inspired by Black Consciousness. Our insights formed during those struggles are hugely relevant today. Tshaka confirms this when he writes, "Colonialism had as one of its objectives the goal of conquering Africa and relegating her people to the status of being sub-humans." As Black Consciousness knew, postulated, and advocated, it was not only about our territory and its resources, it was also about our humanity. I will continue to plead for two major things here: one, that these struggles be seen as struggles against empire and continuing imperial dominance in Africa by empire. Not only must the colonial and apartheid baggage be engaged, these must be engaged as the result of projects inextricable from the imperialist venture that even today has still not ended. This is the irrevocable context for these endeavors today.

That also means that Africinity, as Tshaka maintains, and as I have argued above, "refers to the spatiality, specificity, temporality, and particularity" of the African conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation" while it also ephasises, as relentlessly as it can, African agency in the ongoing, determined struggles of Africans to embrace their full humanity,

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<sup>63</sup> See Allan Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah*, 153-154

gain their entire liberation, dignity, and the power to self-realisation and self-determination, free from the shackles of imperialist imposition.

The second matter is as important. This struggle must, from the very beginning, include women as equal partners, recognize women's agency, and accept women's leadership and unique contribution. If this is not the case, our Africanity cannot be authentic, our Africanness can never be whole, and our processes of Africanization will remain flat and static. Like a sun that sits on the horizon but never rises, it will promise a new, brighter day, but remain chained to the darker impulses of a night that never really let go.

Understanding South Africa today - not just its unrepented racism but also its unacknowledged ethnocentrism; not just the burdens from its apartheid past but also the anguish from its re-colonised present; not just the poverty created by white greed and exploitation, but also the unconscionable social and economic inequalities created by black greed and indifference - means understanding the need for Black liberation theology's Jesus as a fighting God.

If we dare to have the honesty, integrity and decency to acknowledge and accept the flaming critique of South Africa's younger generation, we would hear Siya Kumalo and in hearing him embrace Biko again, and this time much more intimately:

The ruling party's claim to South Africa's loyalty is that the ANC of J.L. Dube, S. Makgatho, R. Mahabane, created to liberate black people, actually did. This isn't true: on the contrary, they signed a deal with the Romans of our day ... it is *not* true that the negotiated settlement was the liberation those sacrifices [made by the people] had always looked forward to. The resultant Constitution is *not* the Freedom Charter.<sup>64</sup>

Now that the need for a Black theology of liberation is once again rising in South Africa, we would also know that the need is not for a Black theology that seek appeasement with the empire and accommodation with the ruling

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56 Siya Kumalo, *You Have to be Gay*, 273

classes, even if those ruling classes are “our own people.” For if for the young Siya Kumalos of this world “our own people” have become the Jerusalem elites, collaborating with the Roman empire in the oppression and plundering of their own people, then what Black theology needs to do is to find, present and present that Jesus who is a fighting God; who will not let the lie rest unchallenged, and who will not rest until the people are free and the temple is no longer a den of thieves.

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