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RELIGION AS A WEAPON OF LIBERATION

In the Black Consciousness context, the road to emancipation combines the paths of both Psychological Liberation and Physical Liberation. The former is critical and fundamental to the preparation and attainment of the latter.

However, there is a dialectical interface between the two. You don't deal with one at a given time. You push for both with emphasis on Psychological Liberation, for it is a free mind than can free the body. This tells us something about the importance of Consciousness in the act of liberation in the Black Consciousness Movement. However, in AZAPO we know that such Consciousness is derived and shaped by the concrete circumstances of Black people. It is a Consciousness that is refined in the theatre of the liberation struggle as practice informs theory, while theory gets sharpened by practice. In AZAPO language, and within the context of our ideological line, we use the weapon of conscientisation to raise the level of Consciousness of both the Masses and the Cadres.

We propose to talk about religion to the extent that it somehow interferes with Consciousness. There was a reason why the BCM felt it necessary to develop Black Theology to deal with the negative effects of the Christian religion on the struggling Azanian Masses. Of the Abrahamic religions, Christianity had proved to be one of those that enjoyed greater reception by the Black people of Azania.

The political need to develop a liberatory interpretation of religion is hardly surprising if we remember that the BCM was founded within the context of theological (University Christian Movement) and institutional student activity (NUSAS), both of which resulted in the formation of the BCM pioneer organisation - SASO.

The BC activists took this line of march despite Lenin's warning that Scientific Socialism was based on "a materialism which is absolutely atheistic and positively hostile to all religion". The conscious decision to develop the weapon of Black Theology is interesting if we consider that in his 1909 "The Workers' Party Attitude to Religion", Lenin documented this reminder about religion:

"Let us recall that the whole of Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, which Marx read in manuscript, is an indictment of the materialist and atheist Dühring for not being a consistent materialist and for leaving loopholes for religion and religious philosophy. Let us recall that in his essay on Ludwig Feuerbach, Engels reproaches Feuerbach for combating religion not in order to destroy it, but in order to renovate it, to invent a new, "exalted" religion, and so forth. Religion is the opium of the people—this dictum by Marx is the cornerstone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion. Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organisation, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class".

However, Steve Biko, though critically cautious, seems to give religion a less hostile look. He is aware of the limitations of religion. In his 1972 essay "The Church as Seen by a Layman" Biko tells us of the "necessity" of religion to the extent that, if there was none, the people would develop one in the march of time:

"If one takes religion as nothing else but what it is - i.e., a social institution attempting to explain what cannot be scientifically known about the origin and destiny of man, then from the beginning we can see the necessity of religion".

Making a reference to Christianity, Biko expresses some critical cynicism that this Abrahamic religion allowed itself to be adapted to the culture of the people receiving it when landed in the various nations of the European world. Yet when it was exported to Azania it displayed some rigidity. It sought to undermine the culture of Black people and proceeded to force them to change their names and clothing in favour of the transporting culture. It dismissed the indigenous Spirituality and Religion as superstition and worship of the Ancestors. All of a sudden, Afrikans remembered nothing about the sanctity of places like the Sea, the River, the Mountain, the Forest, the Cave, the Grave, the Kraal, the Fire Place and the Main House and Yard Courts. In no time, there were violent divisions among Afrikans between the "amagqobhoka" (Christian converts) and "amaqaba" (the red ochre smearers). The word "amagqobhoka" literally refers to those whose vulnerable hearts have been successfully pierced by the Christian message, whereas "amaqaba" were viewed as those that were resisting "modernity" (Eurocentricity) and therefore backward. In this regard, Christianity got associated with the colonising and oppressing European forces.

In *Aa! Zweliyazusa! iTshawe laseBhilithani* (*Aa! Hail the Hero of Britain*), what is regarded as one of his best protest poems, Krune Ngxekengxeke Mqhayi chants as follows when he pretended to praise the Prince of Wales, while viciously critical of him and colonialist Britain:

"Hay' kodw' iBritan' eNkulu –
Yeza nebhotile neBhayibhile;
Yeza nomfundis' exhag' ijoni;
Yeza nerhuluwa nesinandile;
Yeza nenkanunu nemfakadolo.
Tarhu, Bawo, sive yiphi na?
Gqithela phambili, Thol' esilo,
Nyashaz' ekad' inyashaza!
Gqitha, uz' ubuye kakuhle,
Ndlalifa yelakowethu.

Makadl' ubom uKumkani!
Ndee ntsho-ntshobololo!!
Ngokwalaa nkwenkwezi yayinomsila!!"

(Hail, Great Britain –
You come with a bottle in the one hand and a Bible in the other;
You come with a preacher assisted by a soldier;
You come with gunpowder and bullets;
You come with cannons and guns-which-bend-like-knees.
Please forgive me o God, but whom should we obey?
Go past, Calf-of-the-big-animal,
Trasher-with-the-feet, trashing us for a long time already!
Come past us and go nicely back,
You who feast on the inheritance of my country.
Long live the King!
Enough about him, I have nothing to add!!
Like that star with the tail, I disappear!!)

In Mqhayi you see the Afrikan skepticism against foreign religions. He exposes the European colonialists of using liquor, the Bible and war to grab the land and enslave the Afrikans.

Jomo Kenyatta had a similar vigilant reaction against the arrival of Christianity in Kenya: "When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible".

Till this day, the "cold war" between "amagqobhoka" and "amaqaba" continues in ever so many ways. In whatever way you look at it, that "cold war" is either procrastinating or postponing the repossession of the land. It undermines the necessary Black Solidarity, which is required to achieve the totality of involvement of Black people in the fight for the restoration of their humanity and dignity.

For the clarity of reflection, it becomes important that we differentiate among Spirituality, Religion and Denomination. Adam Brady (2020) takes the line that there is a lot of overlap between Spirituality and Religion. However, he stresses the point that they are not the same. Of importance, one can be Spiritual without being Religious, whereas you cannot be Religious without being Spiritual. Says Brady, "By definition, religion is a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; the service and worship of God or the supernatural. Spirituality, on the other hand, connotes an experience of connection to something larger than you; living everyday life in a reverent and sacred manner".

Denomination refers to the institutionalisation of religion in the configuration of the various compartmentalisations of Christianity as the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and so forth. The debilitating "cold war" between "amagqobhoka" and "amaqaba" gets extended to Christianity and among the various categories or sects. Feeling some cultural and spiritual alienation in some of these foreign churches, Black people have been creative to try and Afrikanise these foreign institutions through

translating the hymns into the indigenous languages and sing them in the Afrikan way of "ukombela" and sometimes accompanied by the beat of the drum and Afrikan dance.

If Spirituality is as old as humanity, and humanity found its origins in Afrika, Spirituality would not have been exported to Afrikans from elsewhere in the world. Afrikan Spirituality predates the exportation of the foreign religions to Afrika. Because the Christian missionaries saw no buildings of worship and "holy books", they concluded that Afrikans were heathens or atheists. They didn't realise that, to Afrikans, the omnipresent God didn't need special building confines within which to be worshipped on special days like Saturday or Sunday. Every day and every place is a continuous moment of connecting with the Supernatural Being. While other nations communicated with their Gods through Angels and Prophets, the Afrikans did the same through the Ancestors and sometimes assisted by the diviners.

With that point made, AZAPO adopted the line that its members have a right to worship or not to worship. For political and strategic reasons, AZAPO would not play in the space of dictating in favour or against worshipping. Like it has been said, AZAPO does see the strategic need to promote a liberatory interpretation of religion, as distinct from waging a frontal war against religion. Black Theology sought to help Black people not to seek for God outside their being and environment. If you are created in the image of God, then it doesn't make theological sense to go hunting and snatching other people's God, when the God of the Oppressed; the God of Afrika is there for them.

Through Black Theology, AZAPO seeks to conscientise Black people to fight to eat bacon and egg here on earth, rather than accept starvation with the hope of eating milk and honey after this life. The Cross of Black people is the "lynching tree". Our Cross is Landlessness, the Massacres and the Prisons. Of course, the Colour of our Skin is our Cross. And that is why we sing "Isono sethu bubuMnyama" (Our sin is our Blackness).

Why do we take this position towards religion as AZAPO? We could simply answer that Afrikans are essentially Spiritual. However, our fundamental reasons are cultural, ideological and strategic. Relying on Engels, even Lenin (*ibid*) goes further and chastise the bashers of religion:

"At the same time Engels frequently condemned the efforts of people who desired to be 'more left' or 'more revolutionary' than the Social-Democrats, to introduce into the programme of the workers' party an explicit proclamation of atheism, in the sense of declaring war on religion. Commenting in 1874 on the famous manifesto of the Blanquist fugitive Communards who were living in exile in London, Engels called their vociferous proclamation of war on religion a piece of stupidity, and stated that such a declaration of war was the best way to revive interest in religion and to prevent it from really dying out".

This effort is a war cry for the deliberate development of a popular attitude to liberate religion and transform it into the weapon of liberation. The priests and the congregants need to come together and make improvisations on how to transform the places of worship into theaters of liberation and battlefields for mental and physical emancipation. The choice is theirs, and they need not do it like the jazz musician Champion Jack Dupree who agitates that priests should one of these worship days put the Bible aside and talk about life as lived by the people.