

THE RELEVANCE OF KAIROS THEOLOGY IN A POST – APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will discuss the relevance of Kairos Theology in a postcolonial Southern Africa and more specific in South Africa. A sub – theme of this paper is to discuss whether it is possible for a theology of liberation to transform into a theology of reconstruction or whether we still need the urgency and fervor of liberation theology as a dominant theological paradigm.

In order to address the above issues one first needs to look at what is liberation theology? Where does Kairos Theology fit in? What does this theology attempt to address? And whether the conditions it attempts to address still prevail?

2. WHAT IS LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Frederick Hertzog in his book Birth Pangs: Liberation Theology in North America, has the following to say about the origin of Liberation Theology: “Liberation Theology in the U.S did not emerge because some people were looking in a more kindly fashion on the poor, but because the poor were looking in a more unkindly fashion on some people. In a new encounter with the Bible, the poor crossed the threshold of the theological consciousness. God’s claim in the poor Christ was felt anew”.

There is no central founding event for the emergence of Liberation Theology. In fact it is a combination of socio – political issues such as poverty, oppression, exploitation, tyranny, etc., that led to the development of Liberation Theology.

Segundo Galilea identifies the three assumptions of Latin American Liberation theology:

- (i) The present situation is one in which the vast majority of Latin Americans live in a state of underdevelopment and unjust dependence;
- (ii) Viewed in Christian terms, this is a “sinful situation”;
- (iii) Hence it is the duty of Christians in conscience, and of the Church of its pastoral activity, to commit themselves to efforts to overcome the situation.

These assumptions force our theology to be concrete and social, and require us to investigate the conditions of poverty, dependence, and injustice.

According to Rebecca S. Chop, the basic themes of Latin American liberation theology are three:

- (i) The “preferential option” of the poor
- (ii) God as liberator
- (iii) The liberation of theology

Jose Miguez – Bonino said that “there is no socially and politically neutral theology; in a struggle for life and against death, theology must take sides”. He further says that “God himself has chosen sides: he has chosen to liberate the poor by delivering them from their misery and marginality, and to liberate the rich by bringing them down from their thrones. Christians and Churches are invited to take the side of the poor, to claim solidarity with them in their struggle”.

Jose Maria Arguedas argues that: “the Gods of the poor and those of the powerful are very different. Indeed, the latter is actually an idol. The god of the powerful broods over a fellowship of the “wretched which he is supposed to have ordained but – thankfully – being an idol, cannot really control. So it is that the de facto fellowship of the wretched becomes the means whereby the oppressed forge de jure solidarity. Together, oppressed people succeed in realizing their aims, for their God is not an idol”.

The struggle between the poor and the powerful is the central theme in all Argueda’s novels. The difference between him and other writers is the fact that he treats it as a spiritual conflict and not merely a sociopolitical reality.

The preferential option for the poor is the most fundamental theme of Latin American Liberation Theology: it illustrates the massive poverty and oppression of the third world as the major theological concern; it identifies the Christian faith as a spirituality of evangelical poverty; and it expresses the experience of God in the journey of the poor. Liberation theology is therefore a response to a God who side with the poor. It works with the actual situations of oppression, responding to specific needs and issues of the people.

Some of the criticism leveled against liberation theology is its relationship with Marxism. Jose Miguez – Bonino explains the relationship as follows: “I have never felt attracted to Marxism as a system; neither have I felt inclined to enroll in any anti-Marxist crusade. Since my youth (in which I was attracted to the Argentine socialist . . . non – Marxist party). I have believed that certain elements of the Marxist economic and social analysis were correct . . . In this sense I firmly believe that we must . . . demythologize the Marx question. On this basis I have found it possible to work together with Marxists and others – on questions of human rights, for instance – with clarity and mutual respect”.

Hertzog have this to say about Marxism and liberation theology: “For liberation theology in the U.S., Marx initially is important in at least two respects: as demystification and as social analysis. There is still the terrifying abuse of God by society as well as the abuse of God by theology itself in legitimizing the abuse by society”

3. BLACK THEOLOGY

Krelzschmar states: "South African Black Theology because of its great concern for liberation, can accurately be described as a Liberation Theology, and is regarded as such by several of its proponents. Desmond Tutu, for example, says: "I count Black Theology in the category of liberation theologies" pg. 71

An investigation into Black Theology leaves one with no doubt that it is indeed one of the various strands of liberation theology, with the difference that I could not find a link to Marxism. However, I must admit that the social analysis is in my opinion definitely a Marxist approach.

Allan Boesak in his book Farewell to Innocents pg. 113 states "Black Theology focuses on the dependency of the oppressed and their liberation from dependency in all its dimensions – psychological, cultural, political, economic and theological. It expressed the belief that because Christ's liberation has come, the total liberation of man can no longer be denied".

Other black theologians of note has the following to say about Black Theology:

"Black Theology is a product of an awareness that black oppression and black exploitation": Simon Maimela.

"Many people have understood liberation as only referring to physical and political domination. I content that liberation has also something to do with the liberation of the spirit . . . when the black man begins to create concepts about his life, destiny and aspirations, that would be part of the process of liberation" M. Buthelezi.

Mosala " It is important to remember that Black Theology did not drop from the sky, it was not created ex nihilo. It was, on the contrary, the struggle waged by black people in the late 60's and early 70's.

"Black Theology is the fundamental instrument of collective empowerment. In this role Black Theology takes seriously the psychic aspect of the struggle for liberation. Revolutionary consciousness, another name for faith, is the precondition for collective awakening of black people in the interest of black liberation" Julian Kunnie.

Black Theology is the "predecessor" of Kairos Theology in South Africa. Not only does Kairos Theology display most of the tenets of Black Theology, it also share in most instances the same proponents.

4. KAIROS THEOLOGY

4.1 DEFINITION OF KAIROS

“Kairos is the Greek word that is used in the Bible to designate a special moment of time when God invites his people to offer them a unique opportunity for repentance and conversion, for change and decisive action. It is a time of judgment. It is a moment of truth, a crisis” (KD, Revised 2nd Edition 1987:33)

4.2 HISTORY OF KAIROS THEOLOGY

Kairos theology is a brand of liberation theology which originated in the mid – eighties when the struggle against apartheid was at it height. It was a time when large numbers of apartheid opponents were killed, maimed and imprisoned. It was a time of mass revolt. It was a time of police and military occupation of black townships. Black townships were under seized and were ruled by the barrel of the gun. It was at this hour that certain theologians “expressed the need to reflect on this situation to determine what response by the Church and by all Christians in South Africa would be the most appropriate” (KD, 2nd Edition 1987) After three meetings of intense debate as well as broader consultation the first “Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church”; saw the light. This document was published on 13th September 1985.

4.3 KAIROS THEOLOGY

4.3.1 INTRODUCTION

After the appearance of the first Kairos Document, a revised second edition appeared and thereafter another document called: The Road to Damascus – Kairos and conversion. “Challenge to the Church” defines issues such as Moment of truth; State Theology; Church Theology; Prophetic Theology and also presents a challenge to the Church and Christians to take Action. “Road to Damascus” analyse the roots of the conflict in South Africa; it also redefines or clarifies the prophetic mission of the Church and then it makes a call for conversion.

4.3.2 CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

The document describes itself as “a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa”. The objective here is not to regurgitate the document but to highlight the salient points of Kairos Theology as expounded in the document.

4.3.2.1 The Moment of Truth

The document argues that the prevailing conditions presented the moment of truth for both the Church and apartheid. It is “the

favourable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. It is also South Africa's moment of grace and opportunity. It is the moment that the Church cannot afford to lose. It is the moment in which the Church will be exposed for what it is. Whilst both the oppressor and the oppressed profess to worship the same God and claim loyalty to the same Church, conflict is the order of the day.

4.3.2.2 State Theology

State Theology is "the theological justification of racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonizes the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy" p3. It does this by misusing theological concepts and biblical texts for its own political purposes. State Theology looks at Rom. 13: 1 – 7; the concept of law and order; the threat of communism; and the god of the state.

(a) ROM 13: 1 – 7:

The document shows how this text is used to legitimize the state and to mobilize blind obedience and absolute servility for an oppressive regime.

(b) LAW AND ORDER:

"The State makes use of the concept of law and order to maintain the status quo which it depicts as "normal". But this law is the unjust and discriminatory laws of apartheid and this order is the organized and institutionalized disorder of oppression. Any one who wishes to change this law and this order is made to feel that they are lawless and disorderly. In other words they are made to feel guilty of sin" pg. 5

(c) THE THREAT OF COMMUNISM:

"Anyone who opposes the State . . . is simply dismissed as a communist. No account is taken of what communism really means". pg. 7

(d) THE GOD OF THE STATE

The State in its oppression of the people makes use again and again of the name of God. Military Chaplains use it to encourage the South African Defense Force, police chaplains use it to strengthen policemen and cabinet ministers use it in their propaganda speeches . . . " pg. 7

Here we have a god who is historically on the side of the white settlers, who dispossess black people of their land and who gives the major part of the land to his "chosen people".

“It is the god of superior weapons who conquered those who were armed with nothing but spears. It is the god of the caspirs and hippos, the god of teargas, rubber bullets, sjamboks, prison cells and death sentences. Here is a god who exalts the proud and humbles the poor – the very apposite of the God of the Bible who “scatters the proud of heart, pulls down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble” (Luke 1: 51 –52)” pg. 8.

4.3.2.3 Church Theology

“In a limited, guarded and cautious way this theology is critical of apartheid. Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter – productive because instead of engaging in an in – depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation” pg. 9. These stock ideas are reconciliation, justice and non – violence”.

(a) RECONCILIATION

There existed a belief that all we need in South Africa in reconciliation and peace. This was the plea of the Church. But there can be no peace and reconciliation in the absence of justice.

(B) JUSTICE

The Church does ask for justice but what kind of justice? The understanding of justice is the reform of apartheid. The Church must mobilize the masses to work towards justice.

(c) NON – VIOLENCE

“The stance of “Church Theology” on non – violence, expressed as a blanket condemnation of all that is called violence, has not only been unable to curb the violence of our situation, it has actually, although unwittingly, been a major contributing factor in the recent escalation of State violence. Here again non – violence has been made into an absolute principle that applies to anything anyone calls violence without regard for who is using it, which side they are on or what purpose they may have in mind. In our situation, this is simply counter – productive” pg. 13

4.3.2.4 PROPHETIC THEOLOGY

Truly prophetic theology is solidly grounded in the Bible. “Prophetic theology differs from academic theology because whereas academic theology deals with all biblical themes in a systematic manner and formulates general Christians principles and doctrines, prophetic theology concentrates on those aspects of the Word of God that have an immediate bearing upon the critical situation in which we find

ourselves. The theology of the prophets does not pretend to be comprehensive and complete, it speaks to the particular circumstances of a particular time and place – the Kairos” pg. 17

The limitations of Church Theology is the fact that it lacks an adequate understanding of politics and political strategy. Church Theology failed to bring the gospel into the political situation.

A prophetic theology must know what is happening, analyse what is happening and then interpret what is happening in the light of the gospel. The starting point of prophetic theology is our current experience oppression, exploitation, suffering, poverty, violence, aids/HIV, gangsterism, drugs; and our experience of trying to be Christian in this situation.

Prophetic theology is a theology of action, such as repentance, conversion and change. Prophetic theology is confrontational by its very nature. It confronts the evil. However, it is also a theology of hope, a theology of good news. Furthermore it is a deeply spiritual theology. The theology is infused with a spirit of fearlessness and courage; love and understanding; joy and hope; strength and determination. It denounces sin and announces salvation.

God is on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited. This is the message of Hope.

Ps. 74:14 “He will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage”

Ex. 3:7 “I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave – drivers. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians”.

Ps. 12:5 “For the plundered poor, for the needy who groan, now I will act, says Yahweh”

4.3.3 THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS: KAIROS AND CONVERSION

4.3.3.1 INTRODUCTION

This document was drawn up by seven different nations: Phillipians; South Korea; Namibia; South Africa; El Salvador; Nicaragua and Guatemala. At the time when the document was drawn up they had much in common: Violent political conflict and Christians on both sides of the conflict. The purpose of the document was:

- To lay bare the historical and political roots of the conflict.
- To affirm the faith of the poor and the oppressed Christians in the seven countries
- To condemn the sins of those who oppress, exploit, persecute and kill people.
- To call to conversion those who have strayed from the truth of Christian faith and commitment.

4.3.3.2 CALL TO CONVERSION

Deals with a call to the oppressors and exploiters to convert from their wicked ways. Saul's Kairos was on the road to Damascus. It is also a call to Christians to side with the poor.

5 THE SITUATION OF THE POOR

5.1 INTERNATIONALLY

Over one billion people are living in extreme poverty. Their purchasing power is less than one US dollar per capita per day. The majority of them are women and girls. Some two thirds of the poor in developing countries live in rural areas, yet urban poverty is also on the increase.

Of those people living in extreme poverty, 44% live in South Asia. Almost half of the population of sub – Saharan Africa is poor.

5.2 AFRICA

In Africa, 340 million people, or half the population, live on less than US \$ per day. The mortality rate of children under 5 years of ages is 140 per 1000, and life expectancy at birth is only 54 years. Only 58% of the population have access to safe water. The rate of illiteracy for people over 15 is 41%. There are only 18 mainline telephones per 1000 people in Africa, compared with 146 for the world as a whole and 567 for high – income countries.

5.3 SOUTH AFRICA

At least 22 million people in South Africa—well over half the population—live in poverty. On average, they survive on R144 per month. Even in the new South Africa, poverty remains strongly correlated with race, gender and urbanisation. Of those people living in poverty, 94 per cent are African and more than 70 per cent live in rural areas. Households below the poverty line are twice as likely to be headed by women as by men.

Recent research has revealed that more than 13,8 million people in the poorest 40 per cent of households do not qualify for any social security transfers. Many of the country's poorest households fall through the net because they do not have members receiving UIF, a state old age pension, a disability grant, nor any children qualifying for a child maintenance grant.

Research done by the HSRC reveals that: "The poorest 40% of households in South Africa earn less than 6% of the total income, while the richest 10% earn more than half the total income. While Africans make up 76% of the population, the African share of income amounts only to 29% of total income. Whites, who make up less than 13% of the population take away 58, 5% of the total income".

"Of the poorest part of the population, a third live in shacks or traditional dwellings. Of the poorest 53% of the population, about 80% have no access to electricity, about 70% have no access to piped water to their premises, and more than 80% no access to modern sanitation",

The unemployment statistics in 1996 was a staggering 4,7 million. 32, 5% of those employed earn less than R650 pm whilst 10% earn less than R293 per month. The agricultural sector has the highest share of low – paid workers (37%), closely followed by domestic workers (34%). Retrenchments and lack of job creation are major contributors to unemployment.

6 RELEVANCE OF KAIROS THEOLOGY

Is liberation theology a fad? Definitely Not! Even the Time Magazine said that: "If anything, liberation theology may well be just to demanding to become a fad" (Sept 1: 1975)

Hertzog says that some people believe that liberation theology is merely a thematic theology. But he believes that it is one of the few unrelenting efforts to think hard about the theological task as a whole.

Sabrino has written that as long as there is suffering, poverty, exclusion and premature death on an immense scale, there will be a need for a theology (whatever its name) that poses the kinds of questions posed by liberation theology. It is clear from section 5 that the poor is still very much a part of us. To ask therefore whether Kairos theology is still relevant is to assume that poverty had been eradicated. It must be remembered the liberation struggle in South Africa was not only a struggle for political liberation but also for economic emancipation. Gustavo Gutierrez ask: "How do we tell the poor of this would that God loves them?"

Bedford's response to the above question as follows: "A critical theology today has a responsibility to bring up again and again in the public sphere the fact that

it is in the public interest (and that includes the interest of the non – poor) to work against poverty and social injustice and for a state capable of limiting the ravages of unleashed market forces”.

It is clear that there is a definite need for a Kairos Theology. But the other question is whether Kairos Theology has the ability to transform itself in a reconstructing theology?

Hertzog says: “Once considered exotic and fanciful, liberation theology now have a good chance of becoming the way ahead for theology in the next century – if only they can manage to be true both to the aspirations of the oppressed and reality beyond in the midst”.

McGovern’s requirement for the transformation is: “Liberation theology should free its social analysis from a preoccupation with global “dependent capitalism” and move toward more specific analysis of land reform and of other pressing needs which would help popular Christian movements be more politically effective at national level”. He further stresses that liberation theology needs to give more attention to the poor themselves, focusing not simply on their need for general “liberation” but also on their values, survival strategies and their need for “explicit ethical norms” to evaluate what “means” are appropriate to Christian change.

Charles Villa – Vicencio takes up this issue when he makes liberation theology not just a theology of resistance but of reconstruction. Villa – Vicencio and Valpy Fitzgerald points out: “Liberation theologians must move beyond general indictments of globalization and neo liberalism to the development of specific analysis and proposals for action, both in micro and macro – economics.

7 CONCLUSION

Kairos theology is not only relevant but we still need the urgency and fervour of liberation theology as a dominant theological paradigm in South Africa.

There are many voices calling for a transformation of liberation theology to a theology of reconstruction. I believe the time isn’t ready for that yet in South Africa. We did not only struggle for the right to vote, but for the total emancipation of the oppressed and exploited peoples. We need some radical redistribution of wealth. The land is still in the hands of a white minority.

Peace is not the absence of War, but the presence of justice – economic justice!

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