



# Karl Barth and Public Theologies! Why Black Theology of Liberation is Still Relevant in the Wake of a Public Theology Euphoria?

*Karl Barth e Teologia Pública! Por que a Teologia Negra  
da Libertação ainda é relevante no despertar de uma  
euforia da Teologia Pública?*

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## Abstract

Karl Barth, who is considered one of the foremost reformed theologians of our time, had disabused his followers of any idea of the essence of the political in theological reflections when he insisted on the wholly otherness of God with his revised Romans commentary. Those whose interest in Barth came as a result of his activities during his stint as pastor of Safenwil, would continue to read politics into his theological metamorphosis. Thus, whether his theology falls within the realm of the relatively new hermeneutic called public theology is expected to be questioned. However, it is imperative to note that the notion of "public" is dynamic and has transformed over the ages. While there are varied public theologies, Black Theology of Liberation continues to assert its relevance in the face of the more popular public theology of South Africa.

**Keywords:** Karl Barth. Black Liberation Theology. Public Theology. South Africa.

## Resumo

*Karl Barth, considerado um dos mais relevantes teólogos reformados do nosso tempo, desiludiu seus seguidores de qualquer ideia de uma essência do político na reflexão teológica quando insistiu em Deus como totalmente outro na versão revisada de seu comentário a Romanos. Aqueles que se interessaram por Barth como resultado de suas*

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*atividades em seu período como pastor em Safenwil, vão continuar a ler o político em sua metamorfose teológica. Desse modo, se sua teologia se enquadra ou não nesta relativamente nova hermenêutica chamada teologia pública é algo a ser questionado. Porém, é imperativo notar que a noção de “público” é dinâmica e se transformou com o tempo. Enquanto há variadas teologias públicas, a Teologia Negra da Libertação continua a afirmar sua relevância diante da mais popular teologia pública da África do Sul.*

**Palavras-chave:** Karl Barth. Teologia Negra da Libertação. Teologia Pública. África do Sul.

## Introduction

Karl Barth has been hailed as one of the foremost theologians for our times. His theology, for that matter, has been transposed to many contexts across the globe. While acknowledging the interest in his theology, Barth would caution that those engaging it should always be mindful of the context out of which it emerged. A closer study of Karl Barth reveals to me that Barth has multiple personalities when it comes to applying his theology. For instance, I believe that the young “red” pastor of Safenwil is indeed a different Barth to the one who authored his massive Church Dogmatics. I believe that these different personalities are even detectable in the revised versions of his Romans commentary. One sees this clearly in the election of which Barth is consulted in the context of South Africa at the height of apartheid. It is for this reason that I speak of an elusive Karl Barth. Here I engage a Barth who had become a tower of theology and attempt to show how his insistence on a wholly other God would be problematic if Black Theology of Liberation were allowed to engage with him.

Since the task was to gauge whether Barth's theology qualifies to be considered under the nomenclature public theology, it became imperative that we be careful to speak on behalf of Barth, especially knowing his disdain for the fusion of the theological with the political. Since public theology is more narrowly defined as an attempt for theology to have a commentary on public matters, one must accept that the publics have always been dynamic and contextual. We then engage Barth on his response to his critics following his first edition. As an African Christian, it has become urgent that the marginal

voices which had become hoarse over the years from the cries to be heard, be considered urgently. As such, we argue that the dismissive rantings of Barth as a result of the insistence that the socio-economic and political matters ought to be taken seriously, would not deter those who have had enough with theologies that exclude their voices and lived experiences.

This brings us to the issues that Black Theology of Liberation has always raised forcefully. Whether the hysteria of Black Theology of Liberation is justified is dealt with briefly. Here the issue of public theology is raised, and the distrust continues to be palpable between those in this camp and those in the camp of Black Theology of Liberation. It is argued that while there are many and varied public theologies, public theology in South Africa will have to take up the call from Black Theology of Liberation to continue a conversation that seems to have been avoided concerning a shared troubled past.

## **An Elusive Karl Barth: On the Question of Theology and Public Matters?**

Karl Barth's preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary provides us with a glimpse of his thinking that led to the publication of what could easily be described as a watershed moment in this theological career. Those of us in Africa had come to be acquainted with the likes of Karl Barth through his translated works. In most cases, the interest in Karl Barth would have been ignited by reference to the theological and how that intersects with the political. For this reason, several black students of theology took an interest in especially the young and radical Barth, who was hoisting a flag in support of the labourers in the small community of Safenwil where he started off as pastor<sup>1</sup>. No doubt that interest would have been activated by those who

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<sup>1</sup> The theses of Mofokeng (1983), Dolamo (1992), and Tshaka (2010) have in common a Karl Barth that dealt with the question of the intersection of theology and politics. One furthermore sees these theses as an attempt at letting Barth speak to political matters even though he is not doing this explicitly. In terms of the theology of Barth since entering the academic space, I find that there is not much engagement of this aspect by black students who used to be interested in Barth.

had introduced Barth to us, and since most teachers of our time were primarily white, they would have played some role in making that initial introduction.

It was apparent then already to me that we have in Karl Barth several personalities. For instance, the Barth that I was impressed with was the Barth, who felt he needed to get involved in the labour issues that plagued members of his congregation in Safenwil (BARTH, 1976). It is significant to note, however, says Robert Hood, that with the second rewritten edition of Romans, Barth makes two significant revisions; first, the distance and strangeness of God over against humankind are stressed in an even more radical way through his emphasis on God's wrath, and secondly, there is a decided deemphasizing of the concept of revolution as a method of political restructuring and change in human society. Hood then points to Barth's exegesis of Romans 8:24 to support this claim (HOOD, 1985, p. 55).

While a tendency of unpredictability with Barth continued, one realizes that if it was retained, nowhere was it as explicit as to when he joined the academic space. It is for this very reason that when a sample could be taken from those black South African theologians that engage with the theology of Barth, one is confident that the interest in Barth is limited to his public support for political praxis and that wherever the wholly otherness of God is stressed, no black South African student interested in Barth will be found. I want to suggest that the likes of James Cone, who at some point credited Barth for his interest in theology, later rejected Barth because they felt Barth was insufficient as a resource to interpret the African American political context (CONE, 1965). This point is thus made to support my thesis that Barth was to remain an elusive figure when assessing how politics were to be engaged theologically.

The "red" pastor of Safenwil had shaped my theological reflection undoubtedly. To this end, I found myself reading political action into all the scenes of Barth's theological metamorphosis (TSHAKA, 2010). I guess this is to be expected if one considers a South African context where almost like the German context, attempts were made by those in charge of academic theology of supporting a theological justification of apartheid. That parallels were drawn between the German context of Nazism and the South African context of a white supremacy theology is in hindsight remarkably

preposterous to ponder given that Barth said not enough about the Jewish question, because '*de Bekennende Kirche was alles behalve anti-national-socialistisch*' (HARINCK, 2003, p. 9). Here Harinck attest to the sentiment that at least not enough for those rising on the Jewish question, is said so unequivocally that the natural theology of the German Christians is not only discouraged but also debunked.<sup>2</sup>

That we enter this conversation of assessing whether his revised Romans commentary does indeed qualify to be a contribution to public theology as we know it today, ask that those who look at the contribution of African Christians to this debate, must remember that we are once again at a loss in that the first edition of his commentary which had catapulted him into international stardom, has missed us. Thus, we enter this conversation belatedly through his revised commentary, thanks to the translation of his work into the English language (BARTH, 1968).

We should thus be forgiven if we seem to be impatient at some of Barth's tirades which originate from the critical reviews shared about his first edition. For instance, Barth writes,

the point at issue is the kind of theology which is required. Those who urge us to shake ourselves free from theology and to think – and more particularly to speak and write – only what is immediately intelligible to the general public seem to me to be suffering from some kind of hysteria and to be entirely without discernment. It is preferable that those who venture to speak in public, or to write for the public, should first seek a better understanding of the theme they wish to propound. Ragaz and his friends reply hurriedly that this proceeds from callous theological pride. But this cannot be granted for one moment (BARTH, 1968, p. 4).

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<sup>2</sup> One of the key criticisms has been the rather ambiguous approach that Barth has illustrated when it comes to the question of politics. Indeed, upon closer reading of his position on this matter, there can be no doubt that he is unquestionably for one position and therefore against another. This is the frustration that I am wrestling with, especially given my view that Barth is political in his theological reflection. For those on the margins hoping that their struggle could be seen for what it is, it is significant that those who are perceived to see the plight of the marginalized, must be concrete in articulating that struggle on behalf of the marginalized. The reason why Barth was seen an ally in the South African church struggle against apartheid was precisely because of his involvement in the confessing movement, yet upon closer reading, one is discouraged not to hear him articulate the Jewish question as clearly as he could have. This in my view is the typically ambiguous theological reflections of Barth on the political.

Questions of a kind of theology must always content with context. Thus, in the case of South Africa, such a question must be seriously content with the questions of a particularity. A theology for whom by who? It is fundamental to realize that such questions are often not raised in vacuums. For this reason, one cannot understand what Barth says in this preface without at the same time referencing some of the other works from that period. For this reason, we also must consider his significant works on the cusp of his revised Romans commentary.

For me, one of the works that stand out from this period would undoubtedly be his lecture given at Tambach, which was occasioned as a result of his Romans commentary. It is also essential to consider the events happening around that time, but the events that contributed to his elusive personality are equally important. For instance, is the fact that Barth engages issues in Germany as a Swiss a credible aspect determining how he responds to issues? For instance, Busch writes that “Barth’s political restraint was certainly also connected with the fact that he was a foreigner in Germany, and to begin with, really felt that he was one” (BUSCH, 1976, p. 148). When moving into the academic space, does the fact that this invitation found himself grossly unqualified have anything to do with a sense of incompetence and, hence, excessive in his preparation for lectures and talks?

Daniel Migliore reminds us that when Barth left his pastorate in Safenwil, Switzerland to take up an academic post at Gottingen, Germany, he was not optimistic about his chances of success. In a letter written to his friend Eduard Thurneysen, he revealed that “I dare not even think about having to lecture three or six or eight hours each week. I just can’t imagine myself in the situation and cannot think that I will be anything but a great failure” (MIGLIORE, 1990, p. xvii). Barth’s proposal of titles for his lecture too was not without controversy. Migliore writes “as an honorary rather than a regularly appointed professor, and as the only reformed theologian on the Gottingen faculty, Barth met resistance from his Lutheran colleagues when he made known his plan to lecture on Dogmatics” (MIGLIORE, 1990, p. xv).

These are but some matters. There are indeed others, but Barth’s lack of engagement with the African Christian question, is one dear matter to me.

He writes in CD IV/1, 'Christianity exists in Germany and Switzerland, but there is no such thing as a German or Swiss or African Christianity' (BARTH, 2004, 703).<sup>3</sup> Understanding the tensions that have come to exist between a western Christianity and its continued disregard to converse with Africans as partners and not clean slates, makes it difficult to ignore the simplistic dismissal of an African Christianity with its particular history. Karl Barth's disregard of the African Christian and his concomitant lived experiences, which are matters that continue to be neglected even as Barth provides an elongated explanation for why he wrote his commentary on the Romans, requires engagement. The question of Africa and its people has become a vital question considering the numerous calls for the democratization of epistemologies. For this reason, this question is critical as we reflect on the standing of Barth's theological contribution to the subject of public theology. We shall have cause to return to this notion to explicate our understanding of it from the point of view of South Africa.

Since the issues that converge on African Christians are always issues of the public, it behooves those who enter this debate to raise questions that Barth, as a person of his time, thought inadequate for his theological reflections. At age 65, Barth embarked upon his doctrine of reconciliation, which was developed into three thick volumes with almost 3000 pages (BUSCH, 1976, p. 377). That reference is made here to the monstrous nature of the volume is deliberate because it would be in this same volume that Barth would dismiss the validity of an African Christian without the courtesy of indulging in a conversation on this matter. In the mentioned CD IV/1, which, as indicated, was written when Barth was admittedly at an advanced age, one

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<sup>3</sup> I want to express my gratitude to my friend Rudolf von Sinner who was kind enough to remind me that Barth, in putting his perspective thus, was speaking to the notion of universality and God's sovereignty. It is not by chance that I referred to the time frame within which the claim is made by Barth. It must also be known at this time that the views that Europe had of Africa was relatively the same. The notion of universality is not without controversies as we have observed how this notion was utilized during the unjust wars of capturing Africa and her people. I was immediately reminded of the words of Eritrean Philosopher, Tsenay Serequeberhan, who when he spoke on the subject of the universal said the following, 'in the name of the universality of values, European colonialism violently universalized its own singular particularity and annihilated the historicity of the colonized' (SEREQUEBERHAN, 1991, p. 4).

finds Barth avowing that 'Christianity exists in Germany and Switzerland, but there are no such things as a German or Swiss or African Christianity' (BARTH, 2004, p. 703).

The fact that Barth mentions German and Switzerland to buttress his argument for the non-existence of an African Christianity should in no way be taken as enough to quell the debate. The comparison of countries in Europe with the continent of Africa shows an added disdain which justifies them for not accepting Africa as an interlocutor. From the moment of interaction with Africa, the West has assumed Africa to be a perpetual infant (EZE, 1997)<sup>4</sup>. It is thus not by chance that Africans see a deliberate omission of Africa in conversations as a continuation of a phenomenon that speaks to the perpetual infantilization of Africa and her people.

Secondly, Barth's imagination of Christianity is so tied up with his European roots that he assumes what Christianity worldwide should look like from his point of view. My reference to accounts of deliberate omissions of a particular group's lived experiences and epistemologies, and one must not ignore the extreme repulsive hubris encapsulated in such accounts, are accounts that the West evoked as ways of pulverizing African existentialism. Karl Barth's disregard for the African Christian has reminded me of the words of the Kenyan theologian, Harry Okullu, who, through the pen of one of the illustrious students of black theology in South Africa, Tinyiko Maluleke, says the following concerning this subject,

[...] when we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to those spontaneously uttered prayers before people go to bed. We should go to the schools, to the frontiers where traditional religions meet with Christianity. We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in the independent churches. [...] Everywhere in Africa things are happening. Christians are talking, singing, preaching, writing, arguing, praying, discussing. Can it be that all this is an empty show? It is impossible. This then is African theology (OKULLU apud MALULEKE, 2008, p. 682).

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the foremost thinkers of the West are leading in this charge, the likes of Immanuel Kant, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Carl von Linne, David Hume etc. comes to mind (EZE, 1997).



While the bible has come to be associated with Africa, one cannot deny the fact that its uncritical study continues to upset African Christians, especially as we discover the more sinister motifs behind the deliberate mistranslations of the bible into the local African languages (see DUBE, 1999). I hope to speak to this matter in greater detail in a bit. For now, what we observe from Barth's reflections following the criticism he had received of his first attempt at the commentary of Romans, is what he considers the neglect of his critics in noting an admission of what this contribution purported to be (BARTH, 1968, p. 3).

## **Karl Barth's Response to his Critics Concerning the Crux of his Commentary**

What is central in Barth's response to his critics concerning his attempt at the commentary of Romans is his sense that his critics had failed to understand the spirit with which he had written this commentary. That his critics have failed to consider his admission is reason enough for Barth to argue that his critics had reproached him unfairly. This work should be seen as a preliminary investigation vital for Barth, who continues this assertion in his preface to his second edition (BARTH, 1968, p. 3). This brings him back to one of the cardinal pillars he claims to have always insisted, must be reckoned with carefully when dabbling in theology, the question of prolegomena (BARTH, 1968, p. 3). For him, we can never claim to speak of God in the final analysis, but ours is a continuous broken attempt at engaging in theological speech. He writes, "there can be no completed work to elucidate this claim. All human achievements are no more than Prolegomena; and this is especially the case in the field of theology" (BARTH, 1968, p. 2-3).

He then proceeds to list four circumstances that had moved him to consider changes in the second edition, and these are, of course, essential circumstances that he hopes his readers would appreciate as they continue to engage with this work. Firstly, his continued study of Paul. He writes, "my manner of working has enabled me to deal only with portions of the rest of the Pauline literature, but each fresh piece of work has brought with its new light upon the epistle to the Romans" (BARTH, 1968, p. 3). The second

circumstance that Barth refers to relates to the charge made against theologians by the New Testament scholar and atheist Franz Overbeck<sup>5</sup>. Overbeck, say, Barth, has claimed that all Christian theology from the patristic age onwards is unchristian and satanic because it draws Christianity into the sphere of civilization and culture, and in doing so, claims Overbeck, denies the essentially eschatological character of the Christian religion (BARTH, 1968, p. 3).

Karl Barth believed that this charge is yet to be comprehensively responded to by the theology of the day. The third circumstance that Barth notes is one that had allowed him an increased appreciation of Plato and Kant. He credits his brother Heinrich for having impressed upon him significant elements in their philosophies (GORRINGE, 2005, p. 55). Lastly, he credits a careful consideration of how the first edition was received as another critical circumstance (BARTH, 1968, p. 4).

It is vital that all this ought to be seen in perspective. We probe whether Barth's second edition of his Romans Commentary qualifies to be public theology is significant given Barth's break from liberal theology. His first commentary on the Romans had catapulted him into stardom; thus, one must gauge how that commentary had sustained his theological genius. In doing this, I think it is vital that, in addition to looking at his second edition, we also consider the aftereffects of Barth since his Tambach lecture of 1919 (BARTH, 2011, p. 31-70). When reflecting on the second edition, Dorrien argues that “the exuberant mood of the first edition gave way to the angry, sharp-edged and prophetic spirit of the book's immediately famous second edition of 1921” (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 246). Dorrien continues, “the first edition was long repetition, exaggeration, hyperbole, dashes, exclamation points and other expressionist techniques. The second edition was loaded with them. Both editions showed Barth's affection for Christoph Blumhardt and his father, who gave Barth what he needed above all else: compelling examples of living in the reality of the resurrected Jesus” (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 246).

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<sup>5</sup> Franz Overbeck was an atheist who taught New Testament and Early Church History from 1870-1897 at Basel and was a best friend of Fredrich Nietzsche (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 247).

It should not be forgotten that Barth had caused an uproar among those who had invited him to speak at the Tambach conference following the publication of his first commentary and those who resided under the impression that Barth would continue in the tradition of religious socialism? that Leonhard Ragaz had led. In my view, the lecture given by Barth at that conference is significant if one is to place Barth in the category of public theologians. Therefore, some brief reference to that lecture is then justified here.

The "Tambach Lecture" was prompted by invitation from a circle gathered around clergyman and lecturer Otto Herpel. Herpel had evolved into a critic of the war's "organized injustice" and an opponent of the "power-state and capitalism" in the name of the welfare state and socialism (BARTH, 2011, p. 31). Herpel and a group of like-minded friends and pastors launched a weekly newspaper with the intended goal of converting Christians to the cause of the new German democracy, similar to the German Democratic Party. *The Christian Democrat: Weekly Paper for the Evangelical Home* was first published on June 4, 1919. There's little doubt that Herpel attempted to steer his audience toward Leonhard Ragaz (BARTH, 2011, p. 31).

Barth disabused many who had become very comfortable with a politicized theology in his "the Christian in Society" speech. For example, according to Barth, "it is not simply a matter of opening the floodgates and allowing the waiting water to pour over the thirsty land" between the "Christ in us" and the world. Combinations like "Christian-social," "evangelical-social," and "religious-social" are readily available, but it's worth thinking about if the hyphens we brazenly draw aren't dangerous short-circuits (BARTH, 2011, p. 37). In his talk, Barth advised Christians to quit asking incorrect questions. According to Dorrien, Barth warned that taking "the shortest stride with Christ in society" was dangerous. "Social democracy and pacifism were popular now that liberal culture and nationalism were despised", Dorrien claims (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 243). According to Dorrien, Barth was concerned about the resurrection of Ragaz's idealism, warning that if social Christians succeeded in resurrecting their old theology, Christ would be betrayed once more. What was most frustrating about that lecture, says Dorrien, was that Barth had no

answers except God and had no theological standpoint because speaking theologically was like trying to paint a bird in flight. Every position, Barth cautioned, is an instant in a movement (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 244).

Even as disappointing as it was for some who had hoped Barth would continue in the direction of Ragaz and the German Social Democratic Party SPD, Dorrien is insistent that “Tambach made Barth a figure to be reckoned with within German theology. The doors of German universities and church groups opened for him” (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 244). There is something about Barth’s reluctance to allow his students the liberty to speak about political matters that impacted their time. Not only was this frustration palpable with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but Gary Dorrien has been particularly helpful in raising this point more poignantly. Since the first edition of his Romans commentary, down to his lecture at Tambach, Barth has been consistent in making the point that any attempt at fusing the socio-political and cultural with the theological is problematic (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 266-267).

This especially in circumstances where Barth's political proclivities had become commonplace. This was particularly disappointing to many who had seen in him an ally against the hegemonic pressures exerted on some communities. For instance, Dorrien reminds us of the disappointment of Helmut Gollwitzer, a onetime student and friend of Barth, which was brought about by Barth's dropping his political activist after World War I and admonishing his students against "squandering their energies" on “Social Democracy or any kind of politics' (DORRIEN, 2019, p. 266-267). I find that the biggest challenge originates from those who had religiously followed the “red” Pastor of Safenwil who had shown greater interest in his activities around the issues that impacted the lives of members of his congregation. The concomitant impression is derived from those affirming that position to insist that there is a continuation in that trajectory. This is sadly the case with Karl Barth.

This brings me to a fundamental matter that those who engage with Barth and other European theologians constantly wrestle with and have devised ways to respond to this frustration. Whether this is helpful or not remains to be seen, but it contributes to asserting the right to tell our story in our voice.

Since Barth has produced a sea of literature, there have been attempts at guiding the readership of Barth on how best to navigate that large amount of information. The Catholic Theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, of whom Barth thought of as cordial and respected as a theologian, has averred that since Barth's work is so extensive, varied and multifaceted, we can't find a way through it without a guiding thread (VON BALTHASAR, 1992, p. 59). In his way, the American theologian, George Hunsinger (1991), attempted to provide such a guiding thread to Barth's readership in his book, *How to read Karl Barth*. While guidelines are pretty significant and must be credited for their contributions for those interested in the subject, I have always thought that the context provided to each of the important events in the theological metamorphosis of Barth's theology was beneficial as I piloted my own interest in Barth. I count Eberhard Busch's (1976) *Karl Barth* as being of particular importance and credit it for having presented to me a Karl Barth I was pretty comfortable with. Whether Karl Barth would recognize himself in my interpretation of him remains another matter.

That there would always be a contestation between myself, an African who had come to know Barth through his translated works, and a European, who share a culture with Barth, is obvious. In the past, evidence that while you have read Barth, but need to read one more book, would be presented in the additional works on Barth prescribed by those who are confident that their reading of Barth is much more supreme than ours. This attitude is often accompanied by a suggestion that we [in the Global South] have nothing to contribute to this discourse, it is justified that we assume the position of being perpetual students, while they [in the Global North] assume the role of being perpetual teachers of those in the Global South. One way of acting against this attitude has been attempts by black students to refuse to engage. This refusal departs from the wisdom of Nkrumah, who once cautioned that the African student of philosophy must understand that they will always first and foremost be foreign students in that class. Nkrumah (1970, p. 54-55) wrote,

A Non-Western student of philosophy has no excuse, except a pedantic one, for studying Western philosophy in the same spirit. He lacks even the minimal excuse of belonging to a cultural history in which the philosophies feature. It is

my opinion that when we study a philosophy which is not ours, we must see it in the context of the intellectual history to which it belongs, and we must see it in the context of the milieu in which it was born. That way we can use it in the furtherance of cultural development and in the strengthening of our human society.

Like so many of his counterparts, Karl Barth has been thrown into African Christian discourses like the proverbial cat among pigeons. These African Christians refuse to be intimidated by the presence of cats such as Barth, which points to a long-standing frustration that had accompanied Black Theology of Liberation's hoarse voice in all matters about the situation of black people, locally and globally.

## **Can Black Theology of Liberation's Hysteria be Justified?**

Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa joins a chorus of voices that since the 1960s had insisted that those on the margins of society, the voiceless communities, ought to be allowed to share their own experience with God and the divine. Black Theology of Liberation, henceforth referred to as BTL, originated in a context when insisting that the material conditions of Black people, which are so often characterized with squalor, obscenity, poverty and backwardness, ought to be seen as a manufactured condition and therefore had nothing to do with a divine plan that predetermined this loathing position of black people.

For insisting on using Marxist analytical tools in assessing the situation in which black people find themselves, this theological hermeneutic had been called all kinds of names. For insisting that the God of white people can most certainly not be the God of black people if a theology is used that justified black people's servile and inhuman condition, it was chastised as not proper and pure theology. Seen this way, one can see that the insistence in finding a resource in Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism, BTL would have been seen a problematic in the view of a Barth that discouraged the association of theology and the political in analyzing society. The pure theology of Barth would have

followed the same argumentation that whites in South Africa made as they wanted to discredit BTL.

So, we see from the origin of BTL in South Africa since the 1960s already, a recalcitrant attitude of refusing whites, which are not subjected to the same conditions as blacks, to be the moral agents, qualified to make decisions for blacks. In a way, this attitude is informed by anger for the double standards that black people had witnessed over the years. It comes very close to a recent decision by Desmond Tutu, who is loved by communities worldwide. In a conversation on the BBC (2013), Tutu declared that he wouldn't worship a homophobic god and would instead be comfortable going to hell. From that statement, I thought that perhaps this is the same attitude that African Christians must adopt against all those "Karls" whose pure theology made them ashamed to rebuff it even as they experienced an omission of their lived experience in the narrative of the interaction of the divine with humanity. This very feeling reminded me of Willie Jennings' (2018) concerns for how the system makes blacks feel guilty when injustices are committed because the last resolve is to blame blacks themselves for their own misfortune.

This is the context in which the BTL must be seen to make sense of the hysteria that her proponents set off when asked to reconsider that nomenclature in favour of some more inclusive. When proponents of BTL in South Africa declared that there is nothing that public theology is saying or doing that BTL has not said emphatically already, this is meant to illustrate the fact that theology was always understood to be public for BTL matter. Having made this provisional point, those who engage with public theology insist that this theological hermeneutic should embrace its checked history of exclusion and marginalization. It becomes imperative that it is stated clearly that there can never be a public theology but always public theologies.

Since BTL has been subjected for the longest time to deliberate misunderstandings, we must insist that black people's lived experiences form part of the vocabulary of popular public discourse in South Africa. Until the voiceless is given a proper audience, we shall have to explain ad infinitum what BTL is. First must be acknowledging context, which justifies the relevance and urgency of black theology in the world, particularly in South Africa. This is so

because black theology has always seen itself as a means towards a particular end. No one explains this context better than Basil Moore and Sabelo Ntwasa. This duo surmises that,

too many blacks have been beaten in every conceivable way until they have come to see themselves through the white man's eyes. Black is evil, dark, secret and reeking of "witchcraft". Black culture and religion are heathen and immoral. Black people are inferior, stupid, untrustworthy, cowardly, cringing. In this situation, Black theologians have to be iconoclast of the "white" God. They have to tear down every image and symbol which, by presenting God as 'white', reinforces this sense of human inferiority and worthlessness. This means not only removing "white God" pictures but more importantly, the white men who seem to believe that it is their whiteness that places them closer to God and thus to the source of the truth and ability (MOORE; NTWASA, 1973, p. 24-25).

The initial point is that the black person must correct this view of the black person. Therefore, a healthy black consciousness is vital towards that end. When the squalid context is recognized as artificial and the relegation of the black person to second class citizenship is seen as a deliberate measure to justify why the black person is treated sub humanely, a positive black theology becomes a conduit meant to pump life back into what has been made a shell of a human being to use Steve Biko's expression (BIKO, 2002, p. 28). Manas Buthelezi (1973, p. 29) characterizes this positive black theology accordingly, "the phrase 'Black Theology' comes out of an attempt to characterize by means or phrase the reflection upon the reality of God and his word which grows out of that experience of life in which the category of blackness has some existential decisiveness". Such a theology can't be a private matter.

Even when perusing Barth's second edition to his Roman commentary, it becomes quite clear that theology must be public if it aspires to serve its mission for the Christian community. This even as Barth cautions of the dangerous shortcuts that come about due to the fusing of theology with the political (BARTH, 1919, p. 37). While I disagree with his sentiments on that matter, I am sure that theology is always meant for the public, even for Barth.

That we must insist on public theologies is obvious, but that we must speak to the specific issues that affect marginal communities, in particular, is even more urgent, and thus a language is needed that will punctuate those issues for the receiving the relevant attention. In the case of South Africa, we



have seen how a dominant theology was at the center of the agendas that questioned the humanity of those communities it did not think qualified to be considered whole human beings. In BTL's defence, by insisting that the spiritual ought to be seen not in opposition to the material but rather as mutually impacting the ontology of black people, this theological hermeneutic was chastised for not being proper theology.

Another essential factor that must not be lost sight of is always the question, who are the interlocutors of this dominant theological hermeneutic?<sup>6</sup> Are the marginalized voices being heard, and more importantly, are they allowed to frame the epistemological questions in ways that speak to their existence and context? While all these questions have belatedly become significant questions in theological discourses, this has never really been the case. Questions of those in the dominant positions have never been considered until very recently. Thus, today it has become essential to consider the theological and political position from which Karl Barth does his theological reflection.

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<sup>6</sup> I prefer to respond to "what a dominant theological hermeneutic" is through a black theology of liberation's point of view. In the case of a black theology of liberation, the dominant theology that brought about this hermeneutic as an alternative in South Africa was a white Apartheid and racist theology. The urgent matters inform the questions that frame each of these theologies. Suppose white theology was to perpetuate a belief that white culture is glorious, and therefore this is proof that God had determined a reality of prosperity for whites, and wanton strife for black people. Black theology of liberation, on the other hand, prefers the marginalized and oppressed people as its subjects for theological reflection. The evidence of dominance comes through issues of popularity and power. In the case of a dominant theology, the interlocution is meant to keep the theological hegemony intact. Nothing in its interlocution is meant to disturb this balance. Should there be a need to address issues that fall outside of the ambit of this interlocution, such would be addressed with no depth and no absolute seriousness. It is always significant to probe who the dominant conversational partners within theological reflections are. In the case of BTL, which had adopted the marginalized as the primary interlocutors, and supported this decision with a theology that aligns itself with the oppressed and the marginalized, it becomes significant to continually keep checks on the positionality that has been adopted to ensure that the cardinal objective of reflecting theologically from the point of view of the marginalized is never compromised.

## The Sustained Relevance of BTL in South Africa Today?

Since the inception of public theology as a new hermeneutic in South Africa, the relationship between black and public theology has been checkered. One would not exaggerate to assert that the relationship between the two has been distrustful. Those in the school of black theology have always argued that public theology is meant to obfuscate the race questions, thereby continuing an agenda of subjecting black theology to the margins and muting its voice. A sense that public theology refuses to acknowledge that hegemonic theology in South Africa deliberately ignored the issues that black theology had taken on as significant for the black majority continues to be a matter that black theologians feel needs to be addressed. It is significant to mention that since the dawn of the democratic state in South Africa in 1994, there have been different attempts at presenting a theology characteristic of a new South Africa.

These ranged from constructive theology, championed by Villa-Vicencio's<sup>7</sup>, to the latter public theology, consisting of theologians from Stellenbosch University and Pretoria University. Maluleke calls it a lobby group tied to the Global Network of Public Theology (GNPT) (MALULEKE, 2021, p. 301). Maluleke refers to this as "a beauty pageant of theologies", with each claiming to be most appropriate for our time (MALULEKE, 2021, p. 302). Taking on Dion Forster (Beyers Naudé Center for Public Theology, Stellenbosch University), Maluleke bemoans that another actor in this beauty context of theologies enters the fray in the form of African public theology. What frustrates Maluleke is the haphazard usage of the notion of African. So, while this newly proposed theology claims that it will not fall into the snares that black and African theologies fell into by insisting on a democratic recognition of the personhood and cultures of black people, African Public theology uses the notion of Africa insincerely. Forster, says Maluleke, seems quite delighted

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed overview of these theological approaches, which had led to Maluleke characterizing them as theologians participating in a beauty parade, see 'Why I Am Not a Public Theologian' (MALULEKE, 2021).

that African public theology is different and therefore more appropriate in that it will not,

limit the scope of their theology to a particular geographical context (Africa), or a particular historical experience (liberation from colonialism, or apartheid), or a particular ethnicity or culture. Such limitations may hinder the ability of African Christians to share their theologies, experiences and discoveries with other Christians around the world. The result might be that Africa develops its own form of “private” theology (private to Africa, or to Black Christians) rather than making its own (MALULEKE, 2021, p. 302).

This, in Maluleke's view, defeats the whole purpose of including the word African in the naming convention and shows a fundamental misunderstanding of African and Black theologies. I need to disabuse the reader of a notion that suggests that all theology talk is for all humanity. This is particularly the case when one considers theology in South Africa. Consequently, even when impressed with the hype of public theology, such theologies are often can mask the issues that gang up on the most vulnerable in society when not highlighted. What is conjured up when black theology is contemplated reminds those who want to move one of the great injustices still visible and palpable in the South African public today. A theology that calls out the ills that are perpetrated on black people seems too cringy. Thus a need is justified for a more mellow theological voice that lumps everything together and is elusive in pointing to the specificity of issues. It is for this reason that Maluleke argues that “public theology is too nice and too neat for the dirty, smelly, messy, chaotic contexts of Africa” (MALULEKE, 2021, p. 302).

Though public theology had reached international renown, it is yet to have a critical conversation with black theology of liberation about a troubled past that continues to impact the lives of the black majority in South Africa today. Public theology has undoubtedly become popular, as can be seen by the centres that carry this nomenclature at Faculties of Theology in South African universities, see, for instance, the Beyers Naude Centre for public theology at the faculty of theology at Stellenbosch, as well as the Public Centre at the University of Pretoria. In the latter case, which the late Vuyani Vellem, a black theologian, directed, it is clear to see how this new hermeneutic has come to

occupy central space in theological discourses in South Africa. What is most interesting is that even though one had Vuyani Vellem as a onetime director of a centre for public theology, Vellem essentially refused to be assimilated into public theology. One instance hear him speak of urban black public theology, which upon closer reading is nothing but a reflection of black liberation theology (VELLEM, 2014, p. 1-6). One thus sees a recalcitrant insistence on blackness in his theological reflections and a repetition of his view that there is nothing that public theology is saying today which black and African theologies haven't said poignantly before.

That Vellem elects to insist on blackness is informed by his experience of blackness in discourses that touches on questions of humanity (VELLEM, 2012, p. 1-9). For instance, while there is no question that human dignity is imperative for all human beings, BTL has long ago realized that blackness itself is the problem. The question of the land, which for those advocating for a theology that does not emphasize race, is a significant question for black theology, particularly given that black people have become pariahs in the land of their birth. The economy, which is intrinsically linked with the question of the land, and is controlled by a white minority, is a further significant question for black theology because the dignity of black people is a cardinal aspiration that BTL advocates for. These are the issues that envelop blackness in South Africa and these are the very reason why the insistence on blackness for the sake of humanizing black people who had become pariahs in their own land annoys those who prefer to sing “Kumbaya, My Lord” (WINICK, 2010).

If blackness were not the problem, great solutions would be suggested and made practical to arrest these challenges that gang up on black people in the world, especially in South Africa. Realizing that these black lived experiences are unique to black communities, blackness as a phenomenon would occupy a key position in reflections of BTL, as indicated above. The issues with which the likes of Vellem and others kept themselves occupied with are indicators that the situation of black people is dire and that the apologetics of black theology as a means of responding to insignificant questions raised by its distractors are to be ignored. In other words, woke students of black theology are not swayed by attitudes that intend to discourage those who

insist on doing a theology that is responsive to the material conditions that black people find themselves in. If this makes BTL hysterical, then so be it.

The views of Vellem comes very close to the sentiments shared by Jennings on the question of the black body in public. Willie Jennings claims that the idea of a Western public began for Africans with modern slavery, in his chapter *African American Theology and the Public Imaginary*. “The black body as a commodity contributed to generate public space in the formation of the modern west, particularly in North America”, he goes on to say (JENNINGS, 2018, p. 469). It helped create the environment in which trading and negotiating gestures and forms of severe utilitarian appraisal could take place, according to Jennings. As a result, Jennings concludes that the African body was built. For him, the initial impression of the modern public is one of being watched. Jennings quickly clarifies this point by emphasizing that being seen is not the same as being observed. “Black slaves and their children were, of course, watched, but being watched has less to do with those intentional practices of surveillance indicative of colonialist cultures and more to do with that developing sensation of being regarded as racial objects by everyone”, according to him (JENNINGS, 2018, p. 469).

He then outlines three different perspectives to support his point of view, which I will quickly discuss. To begin with, black bodies are in pain, but the observer may choose to ignore it. Every forced gathering of terrified Africans on the continent's coast, every unloading of melancholic human cargo, and every tear-filled and anguish-haunted slave auctioned demanded the same discipline; ignore their misery and commodify them. Throughout history, people have been taught to look upon black bodies with contempt. Jennings, however, emphasizes the need of viewing this contribution in context.

As a result, he insists that by stating this, he is naming a pedagogy embedded in public viewing of black bodies being tortured, impoverished, killed, bodies dying, sick, imprisoned, or simply mistreated or disrespected, which does not produce the kinds of collective responses to action that one would expect from such viewing. Instead, when viewed, the suffering black body collapses in on itself, inviting viewers to investigate the self-caused

reasons that have resulted in that misery. Regardless of how it is handled, the common notion is that this body is to blame for its mistreatment (JENNINGS, 2018, p. 469).

Second, black bodies can be thought of as tradeable commodities. With this perspective, Jennings claims that the commodity form percolates into the body's perception so that black bodies are seen not only as utilitarian but also as fundamentally interchangeable. Because of the utility and interchangeability of black people, social depth perception is lost when they are viewed (JENNINGS, 2018, p. 470). We might call this stereotyping, but it's more of a collapsing of individual identity into a collective image. Instead, stereotyping constricts the narrative dimensions of life through which persons can be seen and hence maps an overarching image of use-value onto them. As a result, when this viewer imagines seeing a black person, it rejects personhood.

Third, black bodies must constantly be judged in front of the public. As Jennings explains, the examination of black bodies arose from comparative analytics that formed with the subjugation of native peoples and the demands of the slave market (JENNINGS, 2018, p. 470). He claims that Europeans compared individuals to their bodies, thus building hierarchical phenotypologies and a growing racial aesthetic system. It is thus for this very reason that the insistence on a black theology is still relevant, and this is aimed at the empowerment of the black person.

BTL's primary person in mind as a theological hermeneutic from the underside is the black person and their material condition. So BTL expresses herself chiefly towards black people, cultivating in their broken spirits a sense of accepting themselves as whole human-beings created in the image of God. Directly, it is a theology that is meant to cut loose the stammering tongue of this former slave, as Hopkins and Cummings (2003) would put it. It debunks a theology that suggests that they ought to accept the pariah status that has been imposed onto them by colonizers. BTL is essentially no apology to white folk, yes it admits that it was called into existence through the violence of white racism, but its chief aim is to enable the doubting black person to accept themselves as a human being. It does not wish to convert white people into seeing the lived experiences of blacks as manufactured conditions, but it

wants to act chiefly as a conduit for restoring them to their full humanity. Therefore, for me, a BTL with no white person in mind needed to be the primary occupation of students of black theology. The issues of the spiritual and the material could not be separated.

In dealing with issues of human dignity, Vellem looks at black communities which are strategically placed on the outskirts of economic zones across all the major cities in South Africa; Vellem dubs these communities “zinc forests” because they are densely populated by shelters made up of corrugated iron, plastics and anything these masses can find to make housing for them and their offspring (VELLEM, 2018, p. 518). While these locales are significant for a neo-capitalist system that thrives on cheap labour, these locales no doubt bring into sharp tension the question of human dignity, which for the African Christian, is inherently linked to land as part of their identity. This can indeed be extended to other issues that seem to have characterized black life in South Africa. We have referred to the land and the economy so far, and the list is endless. For instance, in dealing with urbanization, Vellem bemoans public transport. In his own words, he writes,

One of the impressions I have developed since living in Johannesburg for the past 10 years emanates from my constant visits to Park Station, and particularly during holidays or “busy” times every year. I have times like Good Friday and Easter or December holidays in mind: crowds, congestion, stampedes, long queues, people sleeping on the floor, children – in one isiXhosa word, *isiphithiphithi* – roughly meaning chaos! One day after having collected my brother from Park Station during one of the “seasons” of stampede, I harbored deep feelings of resentment. I thought: One sign of the success of our political liberation will be a less chaotic Park Station. I have also been at OR Tambo Airport during these hectic periods, but the situation is different! (VELLEM, 2014, p. 1).

BTL has become a proxy for the voiceless in South African society. This is so because it must be noted that within the ambit of BTL resides a diverse populace, ranging from the black middle class to the general black *hoi polloi* in South Africa. Over the years, the issues that BTL would take upon the masses were not without its challenges. To this challenge, Vellem raises the question of interlocution. Who are the conversational partners in a discourse facilitated by black theology? At the heart of this conversation is an admission that not

everyone can be a conversational partner in this discourse. Vellem refers us to Maluleke, who noted the following in the black community.

Within the Black community, it was acknowledged that there were men, women, petit bourgeois, rich, poor, a worker class, etc. Even more significantly, it was realized that not “all Black people [can] do black theology” and therefore Black Theology does not amount to “any theology done by any group of Black people”. Thus, while objective blackness remained a basic category of social analysis, it became one amongst several other categories. It thus became important for Black theologians to identify a community of interlocutors – not informants, objects or beneficiaries – within the diverse Black community (MALULEKE apud VELLEEM, 2012, p. 3).

## **Black Theology of Liberation Today. Can Public Theology be an Ally?**

The task of determining whether the theology of Karl Barth, varied as it is, falls within the ambit of public theology has exciting prospects. The term "public theology" has gained popularity to unite like-minded students of theology around the objective of theology to provide public commentary on the issues that affect humanity. All this seem fantastic and appealing. However, it is even more critical that we allow space for evaluating how much we have learned from Barth and his relevance in theological reflections while also assessing whether now is the best time to allow for new Barths to set the agenda for theological reflections in our diverse and varied circumstances. Forcing Barth into a public theology straight-jacket because we need people like him on our side could be a distortion of Barth.

I believe that context is enough as we reflect on Barth's theology and whether that theology had anything to do with the particular socio-economic and cultural contexts in which he found himself. We find ourselves in a wholly different context, with African Christians fed up with conversations that continue to ignore and gloss over their realities. These Christians have become accustomed to thinking theologically on the periphery. It should thus come as no surprise that the issues that Barth dismissed? as irrational and dangerously flawed would today receive a response that is informed by what it means to



be in a position that advocates for a pure theology in the face of the inhumane treatment that is meted out against blacks across the globe.

So, the tirades of Barth today do not terrify these Christians. They are unafraid because they are well-versed in their narratives and refuse to have others tell their stories for them. Since black people's humanity is at stake, a wholly other theology that has no bearing on those on the margins, that is proposed, is a theology that these Christians reject as worthless, and just like Desmond Tutu, would rather be comfortable languishing in hell. Consequently, if this public theology which has become a more acceptable form of theological engagement because it does not place accents on issues of race, which continue to bedevil relationships in South Africa and the world today, this too, shall for the time being remain a theological engagement which is viewed with great suspicion.

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