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Speech: An Authentic Theology

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AN AUTHENTIC THEOLOGY

Because it was designed and called into being to answer urgent and often life and death questions, this authentic theology has had to be hammered out on the anvil of adversity and not worked out in the calm of a seminary office or library. It was frequently challenged to establish its credentials as established by academia and in some instances was regarded as politically subversive and part of the onslaught against the prevailing status quo.

I recall on one of my visits for the Theological Education ^{Fund} ~~Foundation~~ to the then Rhodesia ruled by the white minority Government of Ian Smith, being stopped at the Salisbury airport (what is now called Harare). The Special Branch of the Rhodesian Police went through my papers and I had with me a draft I was doing on Black theology. They quizzed me at some length regarding this particular manuscript. When asked, "What is this?" I replied, "It is theology" - the police officer retorted disdainfully, "This is not theology, man. This is communism." My PA in England had once said to me regarding my habit of asking first for one thing and then another, and yet another, that I really didn't want a secretary. What I needed was an octopus with several tentacles. I had taken to writing to her and addressing her as "My dear Octopus" and the police officer thought he must be on to something quite sinister. Not only was I carrying theological contraband but I was corresponding with agents who had code names. I don't think he really believed me when I told him the somewhat mundane truth.

And yet in many ways that police officer was right.. Black theology as we practiced it then was indeed subversive and most of its practitioners were under police surveillance and this in a country that claimed to be Christian. It was the sort of setting that was the *Sitz im Leben* of the biblical apocalyptic literature where cryptic symbols and code language had to be employed to communicate hope and defiance in an oppressive period.

What was the nature of the oppression? The whole thing was based on race. There was an obsession with race, with skin color, with race purity, in much the same way that it had possessed Hitler and the Nazis who sought to eliminate those who were not pure Aryans. The Nationalists when they came to power in 1948 led by a former DRC dominee (ordained minister) who had become a newspaper editor, engaged in a frenzy of racist legislation. They passed the Race Classification Act according to which the people of South Africa were to be classified according to race as if they were so many cattle. They did not use scientific definitions and ways of determining race which could perhaps have mitigated the awfulness of what they were doing.

You were European or white if you looked white and had generally been accepted as white, you were not white if you did not satisfy these criteria. It happened sometimes that children in the same family could in fact be classified as belonging to different race groups when one was perhaps of darker hue than the others. Those who were such victims often committed suicide because South Africa was a "pigmentocracy" as someone caustically described. Rights and privileges were doled out or enjoyed according to where you were on the race pyramid - with the whites at the top, followed by the Indians, then the Coloured, and at the bottom, the base of the pyramid, were to be found those who bore the brunt and the burden of the entire system, the vast majority of the country mostly landless, without significant rights, without the franchise, receiving the lowest salaries.

The bureaucrats had crude methods to determine what was of such crucial importance for an individual which would determine where they lived, what schools and universities they could attend, whom they could marry, what jobs they could do, what level of pay they could expect, where they could be buried, for in death too there was rigid segregation.

They used a coin or a comb to determine whether their client was a coloured or a Native. If the coin or comb moved fairly smoothly through the hair, then you were Coloured, if it didn't then, why you were a Native. Or they might stick a pin into you unexpectedly and if you yelled, "Aina", then you were Coloured and if you said, "Ma we" then you were Native.

This would all have been utterly ridiculous and laughable had it not also been so tragic. We know of the traumas experienced by those who lived the furtive life of playing white, living in the insecurity and uncertainty of being caught out. We know of the distressing sadness of people crossing the road or turning back just so they could avoid meeting with darker hued brothers and sisters and acquaintances who would have put paid to their charade.

The Afrikaners but perhaps many English speaking whites who claimed to oppose apartheid but in their heart of hearts enjoyed with an undisturbed conscience the privileges and benefits it brought them, were obsessed with racial purity and opposed miscegenation. And one wondered how the coloureds ever came to be because they were originally the progeny of black/white unions. And so they passed the Immorality Act. Which prohibited sexual relations between black and white as did the Prohibition of Mixed marriages Act, making illegal marriages between the races. The South African Police spent a lot of time in trees peering into rooms and rushing to feel sheets, whether they were warm, to check out whether forbidden sexual intercourse had happened between black and white. Even if persons loved each other, their relationship was turned into something furtive

and sordid. Again people committed suicide or had their careers destroyed because they were charged under the Immorality Act.

They passed the Separate Amenities Act and the Group Areas Act to segregate the races territorially and led to one of the most tragic and most massive piece of social engineering ever, moving people about like so many pawns on a chessboard in the futile dream of unscrambling the omelette of racial mixing that was the reality of South Africa. In Cape Town there was a vibrant multiracial community in what was called District 6. Overnight it was destroyed by decree of the Department of Community Development. The Coloureds and blacks were uprooted and dumped in dormitory ghettos, with matchbox houses to replace their former spacious homes. Often people would pass their former homes now occupied by whites and say, "That used to be home". Sophiatown where I grew up was declared an area for whites, the homes were demolished and the area renamed Triomf (Triumph) rubbing salt into the wounds.

Aplo / ambulance

Three and a half million people were uprooted and dumped as if they were rubbish in poverty stricken bantustan homeland resettlement camps. Zweledinga. The father would go to the white man's town as a migrant labourer on contract for eleven months of the year, living an unnatural life in a single sex hostel, prey to all sorts of social ills - prostitution, drunkenness, etc. and paid a low salary because he was considered single. Black family life was being undermined not accidentally but by deliberate Government policy in a country that had a public holiday called Family Day.

Blacks were designated in all kinds of humiliating ways. They were called Natives and in the South African way of using words to mean what they wanted them to mean Native did not apply to whites who were Europeans even if they had not set foot in Europe and had in fact been born in South Africa. We even had that oddity "foreign Native" (road sign). We were referred to as Non-white/Non-European and I can tell you I understand all the strictures about sexist language because language is not just descriptive of reality. It creates the reality it describes. It was not long before we developed a negative self-image and becoming filled with self-hatred and self-contempt.

I have said that the worst, the most evil aspect of oppression is not the unnecessary and untold suffering it inflicts on God's children, awful as that often was, no it is that it could get to make a child of God doubt that they were a child of God. This is blasphemous, really spitting in the face of God.

The black had no say in the running of the land of his birth because they were denied access to political power which in its turn gave access to all other kinds of power.