

Theorising Steve Biko’s ‘Human Face’ Challenge alongside Gabriel Marcel’s Embodied Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Within a context of globalisation and multiculturalism –spaces of disjuncture and identity fissures, what role could religion (Christianity) play? Steve Biko’s statement concerning religion having a human public face shall be contextualised and put into dialogue with Gabriel Marcel’s concepts of embodiment. The paper concludes that a religion that has a public human face promotes empathy or interconnectedness, providing an alternative conceptualisation of anthropology anchored on empathy, participation and inter-subjectivity.

Keywords: interconnected, religion, embodiment, human face

Introduction: Locating the Research Argument

Steve Bantu Biko though trained as a medical doctor was a philosopher, politician and a humanitarian. His ideas have been used in various disciplines where questions of identity and justice are raised. For example, recently, Steve Bantu Biko’s ideas provided the epistemological material to the Fees Must Fall Movement, providing the epistemological sounding board for the articulation of sentiments of inequality and black experience. Biko, though not a theologian, reflected on questions of theology in the context of apartheid. My starting point on reflecting on Biko’s views concerning the public role of religion is the profound statement that he made in respond to Christianity saying,

We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face (Oliphant 2008:214).

Though simple, the statement is pregnant with meaning. Two preliminary points are worthy highlighting. From the statement, Biko sees Christianity as an antithesis to humanity. Why colonial Christianity is inhumane are further explained below. The second aspect from Biko is that a religion with a human face derives its epistemological resources from the plight of the people; an aspect which is at the centre of Biko's argument in his articulation of the understanding of God and social relations (Mngxitama *et al.* 2008:15). Biko's call for a religion that has a human face, in my view, provides the discussion material upon which to talk about issues related to social disjuncture and disrespect of life in general. Among others, Biko allows us to raise questions such as: what kind of society is envisaged under a religion that has a human face? My task in this paper is to explain the characteristics of a religion with a public human face within the context of globalisation and multiculturalism – our context.

Challenges Associated with Globalisation and Multiculturalism

Globalisation is characterised by post-national realities; people and businesses travel and operate at a global stage and no longer bound by national boundaries. Globalisation and multiculturalism are related terms; while the latter describes the post-national reality, the former refers to the condition of multinational identities existing within one geographic space. Advantages and disadvantages exists, such as the free movement of people and a rich culture based on various identities; the global co-existing with the local. Terms such as poly-identity and poly-phonic are often used to describe such contexts.

However, in recent years, globalization has resulted in inequalities (Fukuyama 1989:3). Contrary to expectation, as Anthony Giddens's (1990:13) poignantly notes, economic disparity and asymmetric social realities are often

the hallmark of current globalisation, celebrating individual success rather than the collective. Besides state welfare and intervention, global capitalism has little to offer towards welfare. Globally, while the rich are visibly rich through the usual symbols of flashy cars and luxurious houses, the consequence of inequality are visible through expanding urban shacks and concomitant social ills such as prostitutions, drugs and burglary. Jean Baudrillard (1983:20) who writes from the perspective of discourse analysis further comments saying, capitalism by not interrogating the structures that makes them poor, it lures people into pursuit for pleasure devoid of guarantee towards economic emancipation. The value of life has been replaced by the pursuit of profit and individual fame and pleasure. Such truth can be illustrated in countries such as South Africa where, instead of questioning the structures that causes limit on aspects such as –water, housing and employment, people people’s attention is diverted towards xenophobic attacks (Dube 2016:1). The picture of the world under globalisation is one whereby people do not respect life and value human dignity.

Aspects of a Religion without a Human Face

For a better grasp of Biko’s call for a religion with a public human face, a brief bibliography of Biko who lived a brief and yet fruitful life between 1946 till 1977 is given. Living during the height of apartheid in South Africa, a medical doctor by training, Biko was appalled by the manner in which the black people were treated. As a system, apartheid was anchored on an ideology that the white people are superior to the blacks and it spatially treated the two races as different (Maluleke 2008:65). Unlike other systems of governance, apartheid was actively supported by erroneous biblical interpretation of God who created the white race as superior and ruler, while black people were ideologically viewed as an inferior race. Thus spatially, the black people were not supposed to live together with the whites. Biko reflected on his experience saying, ‘I have lived all my conscious life in the framework of institutionalised separate development. My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development’ (Biko 1987:29a). Christianity was used as a discourse to cement the subjugation of the black people and to create a false narrative that discursively portrays black people as inferior to white people (1987:81c).

First for Biko Christianity which is steeped in western mind-set has no public human face because it does not relate the lived experiences of the African people. Here Biko's comment should be understood from the perspective of contrasting worldviews of individualism versus collectivism. More importantly western Christianity during that time could not be separated from the entitlements of racism that describe Africans as less human. Thus for Biko the God espoused by Christianity has no resonance to the condition of the black people because he is removed from the plight of the black people. Biko gives insight saying,

‘whereas Christianity had gone through rigorous cultural adaptation from ancient Judea through Rome, through London, through Brussels and Lisbon, somehow when it landed in the Cape, it was made to look fairly rigid. Christianity was made the central point of a culture which brought with it new styles of clothing, new customs, new forms of etiquette, new medical approaches, and perhaps new armaments’ (Biko 1987:57).

Embedded within the above statement is the westerner's perception of the African as receivers of everything including God. Western missionaries, travellers and colonialist did not see the Africans as dialogue partners. This can be illustrated from David Livingstone, a traveller and explorer on behalf of the British government who understood the purpose of his expeditions as bring three ‘Cs’ –Christianity, commerce and civilisation to the African people. The west saw as part of their religious duty as that of bringing knowledge of God to the black people. Two sub-variables informs this mentality: first, Westerners whose mentality was steeped in evolutionary anthropology truly regarded Africans as less-human. Biko criticises the white people for regarding blacks with adjectives like dark, uncouth and godless (Biko 1987:85). Secondly and related to the above, God was supposed to be taught to the black people because they cannot think or rationalise about God. God was conceived as a being whose attributes are understandable through logic. Since God is understood from rigorous philosophical thinking, an aspect that was seen as non-existent among the African people, blacks were seen as having no clue regarding God. This whole mind-set informs the western's approach towards the Africans and God. Thus God was supposed to be transmitted via western lenses and such knowledge to be diligently transplanted into the native's minds. In several

insistences Biko debunked such prejudices, so also several African theologians such as John Mbiti (Mbiti 2015: 45). Biko's response is that God is an ever-present reality does not need to be learnt through the bible. However Biko had no problem with the Bible but with the assumption that only through the Bible can the Africans know God thus disregarding other sources through which God has spoken to the African people.

Second, the church has no public face because it is aloof and distant from the suffering of the black people. Biko has no kind words towards the church, missionaries and the collaborators – the black ministers. He sees the church, which he regarded as an oppressive institution, as a mere extension of colonisation, whose existence is to further stupefy the black people through discourses and teachings which defers their earthy bliss (1987:55c). Biko comments saying that,

in a country teeming with injustice and fanatically committed to the practice of oppression, intolerance and blatant cruelty because of racism bigotry, in a country where all black people are made to feel the unwanted stepchildren of a God whose presence they cannot feel; in a country where father and son, mother and daughter alike develop daily into neurotic through sheer inability to relate the present to the future because of a completely engulfing sense of destitution, the Church further adds to their insecurity by its inward-directed definition of the concept of sin and its encouragement of the 'mea culpa' attitude (Biko 1987:57).

The above statement evokes the question – why did the church during colonialism, not speak to the social issues affecting the people? Biko lists concerning social ills such as cruelty, subjugation, poverty and racism and expects the church to begin its theology by addressing these issues, but alas, the church shifts attention to focusing on issues concerning sin and salvation. From the above statement Biko seems to be raising the profound statement regarding the allegiance of God. Biko seems to be arguing that if God is universal, loving and creator of all, then indeed, he would be enraged by the condition of the black people under colonialism. In view of this research we can deduce that a theology with no public face is one whose God is deaf to the cries of the people. But why? Such a God would be aloof is he is discursively constructed as having a particular colour. The colonial God was constructed as

a God of the white people whose activities were sanctioned by their God. Thus from Biko we can learn that colonialism was a political economic project with a theological engine as its discursive glue.

Third, for Biko the colonial church has no human face because it sidesteps the real questions of racism, injustice and subjugation. Biko raises this issue mainly in his discussion about black ministers. These in Biko's eyes should know better because they come from the people and share much in common with their fellow Africans compared to the white missionary. Biko retorts,

our ministers are still top busy with moral trivialities. They blow these up as the most important things that Jesus had to say to people. They constantly urge the people to find fault in themselves and by so doing detract from the essence of the struggle in which the people are involved (Biko 1987:32).

This is one clearest instance where Biko expressed his relationship towards black ministers whose preaching does not relate to the main challenges facing the people –poverty, oppression and racism. Biko describes them as detractors who concentrate on moral vices than the real issues. While Biko did not condone criminality in the township, he sees it as consequence of the people's condition. A perspective by Jean and John Comaroff is plausible in understanding Biko's evaluation of Black ministers. In an article Christianity and colonisation in South Africa, they argue that like colonialism, Christianity had what they characterised as diffused agency (Comaroff & Comaroff 1986: 1-22). While colonisation was channelled towards the possession and extraction of resources from the blacks, colonial Christianity was devised as a tool to stupefy the natives. From this perspective Biko's statement makes much sense. Far from being regarded as agency of a good God, black ministers worked for the colonialist to provide the discourse that make the black people not to question the material condition of their existence. Biko makes a clear critique of Christianity saying,

'It was the missionaries who confused our people with their new religion. By some strange logic, they argued that theirs was a scientific religion and ours was mere superstition in spite of the biological discrepancies so obvious in the basis of their religion. They further

went on to preach a theology of the existence of hell, scaring our fathers and mothers with stories about burning in eternal flames and gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. This cold cruel religion was strange to us but our fore-fathers were sufficiently scared of the unknown impending anger to believe that it was worth a try. Down went our cultural values! (Biko 1987:44).

Though not clear, Biko's reference to the biological discrepancies within Christianity may refer to the unresolved issue of Immaculate Conception. Biko seem to cite this as evidence that, like in African religion, Christianity is not scientific as it claims; it too as myths. In addition, illustrated by the above citation is the idea that missionaries presented Christianity as a coercive religion; one that must be accepted if not you burn in hell. The conversion to Christianity was due to fear of burning in hell. Further implicitly from Biko is that the Christian God is cruel; his terms and condition are so strict that offenders, besides going to hell, have no second change. This further reinforce the argument that the primary focus of western Christianity was supplanting local religion with western worldviews; never about the welfare of the black people.

Perspective: Embodied Hermeneutics

Having explored Biko's critique of Christianity as lacking a human face, the next task is investigating what Biko meant by a religion with a human face. Andile Mngxitama *et al.* argues that Biko's call for human face should be prefaced within the larger argument of black communism. For Mngxitama *et al.*, Biko was not advancing an ethical argument because he fully knows that apartheid could not be overthrown overnight (Mngxitama *et al.* 2008: 1-20). Instead he was advocating for an alternative political system based on black communism which became the basis of his criticism of the black elite and white supremacy. While Mngxitama *et al.* presents a valuable argument by taking cognisance of the political context of Biko, I fear that much focus is on the political context, rather than the moral context behind the call – an argument presented by Andries Oliphant.

Oliphant (2009:217) postulates that Biko's call for a religion with a human face should be theorised from the perspective of African cultural resources, for example Ubuntu. According to Oliphant a religion with a human

face is characterised by 'human-centeredness; intimacy; trust; belief in the inherent goodness of human beings; communalism and cooperativeness; caring and sharing; collective ownership; a monotheistic religion with a benevolent God and ancestral deities; a situation-experiencing mind-set; communicativeness; and a closeness to nature (Oliphant 2008:223). He further elaborates saying that 'the human-centeredness of African village communities, on the other hand, is manifest in the bonds of kinship and forms of social interaction not exclusively governed by economic interests or any other forms of exploitive instrumentality'.

It is plausible to say that Oliphant describes Ubuntu from a moral perspective emphasising on collective values and shared virtues. From Oliphant's perspective, a religion with a human face instils and expresses the moral imperatives of a God who wants his creation to live in harmony. There is a progressive linear argument underlying Oliphant's argument that starts from a moral and just God to the creation that is mandated to live in harmony. Several similar research have been done that seek to demonstrate the relevance of Ubuntu. For example Augustine Shuttle and John Bhengu advances the idea that Ubuntu is an essential moral canopy for the practising of democracy and ethics (Shutte 2001; Bhengu 1996). Equally Njongokhulu Ndungane in biography of his own life refers to a world with a human face of caring and equal access without giving much detail regarding the theoretical base upon which such caring can be realised (Ndungane 2003: 20).

In my view, a moral perspective represented by Oliphant fall short in explaining how God relates to creation. It seems Oliphant does not account for the constant re-definition of God based on people's experiences –a frequent idea from Biko's critique of Christianity. Biko accused Christianity of being stagnant in one culture –the western worldview and failing to metamorphosis into the experiences of the native people. Similarly a perspective such as that of Oliphant perceives God as stagnant and being a source of morality. As Biko critiques, it further locates God outside the experiences of people. Hence while I agree with the bulk of Oliphant's moral approach, I think Gabriel Marcel's embodied epistemology brings a much clearer explanation of Biko's view concerning a religion with a public human face. My focus is to bring the ideas of Biko in dialogue with those of Marcel to give a clearer explanation concerning his understanding of the public role of religion.

Gabriel Marcel, a child of a French diplomat, was born in Paris, France in 1889 and died in 1973. As a young man his condition of being hypertensive

made him ineligible to serve in the military during the world war one and two. Instead, he served in the Red Cross where he was responsible for the welfare of the combatants and delivering the news of death to relatives. From his biography, events of pain and death witnessed during the World War II shaped his philosophy about God and humanity (Marcel 1987:5). Marcel was deeply touched by the experience of pain, wounds, broken bodies which became his starting point in doing philosophy. As an existentialist, Marcel came to a conclusion that experience is the source of epistemology. Experiences such as pain, sorry or any other are felt within the body and not as something outside one's body. By saying so, Marcel criticised rationalism for objectification; separating the body from its meaning –experience.

In my view Biko and Marcel share similar challenges of trying to find sense of meaning or epistemology in relation to the body or self. I regard both arguing that meaning cannot be derived outside the Self. Thus concerning religion, they both argue that religion is an experienced relationship of self with other people and God – not dogma or creeds. From this background, what then is the religion with a public face?

First, the religion with a public human face begins with the identity of God as a non-detached God, an idea that should not be confused with the Christian idea of incarnation. In Christianity, incarnation refers to God who took a human form through Jesus. In Biko the idea of a non-detached God refers to God who derives his existence from people's experiences. Unlike in Christian theology where God visits to learn of human condition, Biko understands God as an embodiment of people experience. God is not a visitor, neither are his attributes located outside the people's experiences. From this perspective Biko struggles with the idea of an imported rigid God; only accessible through rigorous textual interpretive skill. Biko (1987:44c) explains saying,

we did not believe that religion could be featured as a separate part of our existence on earth. It was manifest in our daily lives. We thanked God through our ancestors before we drank beer, married, worked etc. We would obviously find it artificial to create special occasions for worship. Neither did we see it logical to have a particular building in which all worship would be conducted. We believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere.

Vuyani Vellem's views from a black theology perspective, helps us to better understand Biko's sentiments. Vellem sees a connection between modernity and racism or exploitation, arguing that modernity removed God from the reality of people's lives, to dehumanise them. He understands the current task of black theology as that of restoring life by denying the false anthropology of modernity (Vellem 2015: 1-6). I concur by saying that a theology of life calls for re-description of God in view of people's experiences. Instead of God who is high and lifted up, God is addressed with reciprocal titles such as 'God of migrates', the 'God of people in squatters', 'God of the homeless', 'God of the abused', 'God of the poor or God of the vulnerable'. Consequently, the reason western Christianity does not respond to the needs of the African people is due to its epistemology that places God outside human experience.

Biko's ideas echo similar views to those of Marcel, a Christian existentialist who argues that the identity of God is described by our experiences. Like Biko, Marcel criticises modernity for its dualistic thinking; God is located outside human experiences (Louis 1976:17). God is not outside my experiences, but defined by them.

What is the implication within a context of multiculturalism and globalisation? First it cautions against universalisation of regional and exclusive experiences which are not meant to be universal viewpoints of God. A public religion within a global and multicultural context demands a plural and multifaceted narratives of God, deconstructing imperial narratives that excludes the experiences of minorities such as women, gays and minorities. If the identity of God is embedded within our experiences then all experiences are valid articulations of God. Second it provides a critique for discourses that addresses God as high and lifted up in hymnal songs. Connected to this is a deconstruction of patriarchal terminology that are used to address God, such as God as 'father', 'king' or 'ruler', which locates him outside the realm of humans (Dube 2013:5).

Second, a religion with a public face within the context of multiculturalism is mediated through collective convictions towards the dignity of life. While the first point points to the re-configuration of the location and description of God, this second aspect focuses on the function of religion within the society. Biko sees religion as that of providing service to the people; to be wide-awake to the concerns of the community –not personal faith or escape to heaven. The challenge that Biko had with western form of Christianity was its lack of commitment towards servicing the people. Marcel

echoes similar ideas by using terms such as fidelity, inter-subjectivity and participation (Strauss & Machado 1984:123). Marcel whole understanding of society and its internal function can be best understood by his use of the term fidelity. Fidelity, inter-subjectivity and participation all refer to commitment to being present. To be present is not passive presence, but active participation. For Marcel, being human is a choice for fidelity or participation, or the lack of it. Fidelity or participation implies a commitment towards those issues that affect society such as the quality and dignity of life. Non-participation is a refusal to take part in solving social issues. From this perspective we can better understand Biko's critique of African preachers who can be described as non-participant individuals in that they did not commit to the collective desire which was freedom and dignity. In my view, globalisation that is met by a participant community will result in a globalisation of the empathy.

Biko's idea of an engaging religion and Marcel's notion of a participatory religion has implications towards the context of globalisation and multiculturalism. A participatory religion would foster social cohesion in context of xenophobia and racism. Commenting on the hospitality of the African culture, Biko's (1987:41) says,

We enjoy man for himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.

I add that globalisation and multiculturalism have brought our differences closer. From the perspective of Biko and Marcel, a participatory religion deals with issues concerning racism and inequalities. For example, in South Africa, race and status are the variables in the way people live. 'White' dominated churches are located in rich neighbourhoods while black churches are in poor neighbourhoods. While this may be understood as consequence of economic factor, it also reveals lack of participation.

The idea of participation also provides critique for the Christian idea of individual salvation. If being religious is participating then teachings such as working out one's personal salvation towards heaven becomes heretical teachings within the church (de Lacoste 1995:72).

Conclusion

The paper thinks alongside Biko and Marcel on the meaning of religion and its social responsibility. First, using Biko and Marcel, the public social responsibility of religion within a context of multiculturalism would constantly redefine of God in view of the people's experiences. God should not be defined by our narrow experiences but by evolving human experiences. For example, in my view this aspects speaks to how slow the church is evolving in redefining God in view of alternative sexualities that are different to the norm. Second a religion with social responsibility should participant by engaging the social ills affecting the society. Religion, from the perspective of embodiment should relocate to the experiences of those suffering.

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