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there needs to be developed a missiological structure for ministering to churches under suffering and for them to minister to churches 'outside.' Thirdly, the doctrine of *communio sanctorum* implies a sharing of spiritual, human, and material resources with the suffering church.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Last year, an American Bible school student came to our Centre for a month's summer internship. Before he left America, he told a friend how Christians in China were suffering. His friend responded: 'If God loves the Chinese church so much, why did he allow her to suffer so much and for so long?' This youth had no answer. When he was in Hong Kong he made several trips to China and had occasion to have fellowship with house church leaders who had gone through much suffering and were zealously doing the work of evangelism. 'Now I have the answer to my friend's question,' he told me, 'I am going to reply thus to his question: "If God loves the American church so much, why doesn't He allow us to suffer so that our churches might be purified, our faith strengthened, and our relationship with Christ deepened to serve Him wholeheartedly?"'.

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# **Role of the Urban Church: A Black South African Perspective**

Bonganjalo Goba

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the apparent weaknesses of theological enterprise in South Africa is the lack of interdisciplinary approach to the study of theology and in the life of the church. For many the notion of social science—particularly in the Christian community—is something which belongs to the profane secular world, which has no relevance to problems confronting the church. Most recent studies which have been concerned with the growth of Christianity, particularly among African people in South Africa, have been conducted by anthropologists whose orientation lacks a theological interpretation, with a few exceptions like Oosthuizen, who in his book *Post Christianity in Africa* attempts to relate the disciplines of theology and anthropology.

In this essay I will explore theological and sociological considerations regarding the role of the urban church—an attempt to develop an ecclesiology which is informed by both theological and sociological perspectives. It is not my intention to provide a theory for urban church research, although theoretical conceptualizations will emerge from what I say. Let me emphasize at this point that I believe the urban church has a unique role to play in urban areas. But it continues to be confronted by many problems—problems which arise from the peculiar pressures of city life, such as the emergence of

secularization, and whoever wants to deal with these problems must be informed by theological and sociological perspectives. The absence of such perspectives will lead to a truncated understanding of the nature and role of the church in the urban situation.

I am not here concerned with what is known as industrial mission, although that may be related to the topic. I am interested in a theological self-understanding of the church in the urban situation which takes seriously sociological implications. This approach raises, perhaps, the critical question of the relation between theology and sociology. Dr. Schroeder has identified several approaches to this problem:

*Considered formally four broad approaches to the relation between theology and sociology are possible. Two of the formulations make distinctions between various disciplines; two argue for a basic unity of sciences. One of the latter usually distinguishes between science and the area of non-science, including theology. Advocates of the unity of sciences may focus upon the coherence and universality of the components involved in experience, or upon the underlying fundamental elements which give rise to everything else. Those who argue for the multiplicity p. 91 of sciences may focus either upon the presence of different subject matters or upon the perspective of different observers.<sup>1</sup>*

As it will be clear in the following sections, my own perspective will fall into the category of the unity of science because of my conception of the human sciences especially as a quest of a systematic self-understanding of problems that confront human existence—with an emphasis in this particular case on a dialogical relationship between theology and sociology.

The other important aspect which I will explore is the role of the urban church in the South African socio-political context from a black perspective. It is therefore my intention to deal, though not in great detail, with the political structures of Apartheid, particularly as they relate to the black churches in the urban situation, bringing to bear on this my own personal experience as a black minister who has served churches near both Johannesburg and Cape Town, and the experience of being a victim of racial oppression.

## **I DIALOGICAL RELATION BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY**

The Church is first and foremost the *laos*, the people of God, called into being by Jesus Christ to participate in the liberating activity of God in the world. It is a fellowship—a covenant relationship between God and believers whose lives seek to manifest faith in Jesus Christ. The Church is also a voluntary religious organization existing in a social context. In this sense it is a social institution generated by the interaction among a plurality of believers with each other for the purpose of seeking a religious meaning for their existence in informing and guiding their daily socio-political involvements and actions in society. This definition of the church, as a *laos* and social institution participating in the liberating praxis of the gospel of Jesus Christ enables us to understand the nature and role of the church, particularly in the urban situation. Robert Lee makes this point clear:

*Understanding the nature and the purpose of the church is a fundamental task. No matter how astutely the urban churchman may comprehend the sociological pressures in a community, the varieties of religious groups, the process of conflict and co-operation, he is*

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<sup>1</sup> W. Schroeder, *Cognitive Structures and Religious Research*, (Michigan State University Press, 1970), p. 11. This section is very useful in sorting out the relation of theology to sociology.

*ultimately driven to the theological question: what is the significance and the mission of the church?*<sup>2</sup> p. 92

This is the critical question to examine in this section, taking into account both theological and sociological assumptions, particularly as they relate to the African ethos that is the unique expression of African city life in contrast to the typical African traditional ethos. The process of urbanization in South Africa has in many ways had a tremendous impact on the cultural values of African people, Such as the emergence of a western life style with traits of individualism, and above all the partial desacralization of traditional forms of religious life. As John Mbiti puts it:

*Modern change is clearly evident almost everywhere and at least on the conscious level. But the subconscious depths of African societies still exert a great influence upon individuals and communities, even if they are no longer the only final sources of reference and identity. With the undermining of traditional solidarity has come the new search of values, identity and security which, for both the individual and his community were satisfactorily supplied or assured by a deeply religious background.*<sup>3</sup>

The church is *laos*, the people of God, participating in the praxis of the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. She has a particular *sitz im leben*, a particular theological contextual stance. This is also true of the African church, particularly the African independent churches. The church as institution as well as a fellowship is a product of western missionary activity and reflects western ecclesiastical structures but with a different religiosity which has its roots in African traditional religion. Georges Gurvitch makes a relevant observation:

*As social frameworks of knowledge, churches always depend firstly on the nature of their revealed dogmas, their beliefs and the rites and practices in which their members participate; secondly, they depend on the strength of the mystical communions that they contain; and finally, they rest on the structure and organizations that correspond to their dogmas, beliefs and rites and practices.*<sup>4</sup>

African churches in many ways are different from typical western churches. While they incorporate in their teaching western Christian tradition, they also reflect the influence of African traditional beliefs. (Here I am referring particularly to the African independent churches and some exceptional cases among the mainline protestant churches). The following characterization of these churches will make this clear: i) They tend to be eclectic in the appropriation of western Christian p. 93 tradition; hence they have been falsely accused of being syncretistic. ii) Leadership is mainly charismatic in the Weberian sense and also based on African traditional roles of an African chief (e.g. leadership role inherited). iii) They have a deep sense of community life and reflect certain aspects of the African extended family and kinship structure and an emphasis on faith healing and the work of the Holy Spirit—spirit possession. iv) Politically they tend to espouse African nationalism while some are apolitical. (This is also true of the mainline African protestant churches). v) The other important aspect is that these churches transcend the so-called tribal loyalties and differences. As Leo Kuper puts it:

*The churches and their subsidiary organizations provide an important area of association for urban Africans, promoting contact among strangers, and transcending*

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Lee (ed.), *Cities and Churches* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.) p.329.

<sup>3</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1970), p.344.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Gurvitch, *Social Frameworks of Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Raw, 1971), p.79.

*tribal and class differences, though these may emerge in separate ceremonies and churches for different linguistic groups.*<sup>5</sup>

The important point I am trying to make here is that African churches particularly in urban situations are unique in that they combine, or in them we see the synthesis of, Western ecclesiastical structures and African traditional understanding of community life characterized by aspects of the African kinship system. The church as a people of God called to participate in the liberating ministry of Jesus Christ is also a social community which tries to cater to the needs of individuals and groups within society. These churches, in spite of their inherent weaknesses which I will discuss later, reflect the social milieu in which they exist. They are in a sense the emerging African urban church.

## II BLACK URBAN CHURCH

It is difficult to find a suitable typology for the African urban churches, as they reflect a spiritual as well as an organizational pluralism. One, I believe, would find in varying degrees some typological aspects in them which J. W. Fernandez suggests in dealing with African religious movements:

*We may now locate the four types of religious movements proposed earlier in relation to our bi-polar continua. Nativistic movements are those oriented towards a traditional symbolism, which they manipulate expressively. Messianic movements generally employ an acculturated symbolism, which despite their acceptance of historic time they manipulate expressively, conjuring up millennial satisfacts. Separatist p. 94 movements employ an acculturated symbolism, which they tend to manipulate instrumentally. Reformatory movements find their base in a traditional orientation, with which, because of their instrumental orientation, they deliberately and creatively combine an acculturated symbolism.*<sup>6</sup>

As I have already indicated, there is no single typology but a variety of typological orientations. However one significant aspect is that African urban churches, because of the impact of city life, are an important focal point of the African city community, as they provide an atmosphere of fellowship which one misses in many civic centres and provide facilities which may not be available in certain urban communities. They are also important in that they nurture and develop the spiritual life of the community, giving it a sense of purpose in a situation of oppression.

Having discussed some of the aspects of the African urban churches, I want to show that like other institutions in urban societies, these churches are undergoing changes owing to the process and impact of urbanization. By urbanization here I mean the appearance of urban traits, especially among the African town people in large urban situations. Urbanization would therefore entail these two aspects. One of the significant impacts of this for the African churches, particularly in the cities, is that they have to Cope with the emergence of an African urban ethos Which tends to challenge as well as change some of the traditional values, e.g. the communal aspects of the kinship structure.

There is also the emergence within this urban ethos of the bureaucratization of certain aspects of the organization of the church, There are now committees dealing

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<sup>5</sup> Leo Kuper, *African Bourgeoisie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p.311. This text gives a general background about life of the black elite in South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Robertson (ed.), *Sociology of Religion* (Penguin, 1969), pp.389–90.

with certain projects and sometimes issues in the life of the church; there is also an emphasis on the aspect of accountability, e.g: in the finance of the churches as well as in their overall administration. More and more emphasis is given to the education required for the occupation of certain positions in the churches, especially for the leadership.

The Other perhaps crucial aspect with which churches have to deal is the youth. They are prone to all forces of secularization, and their world view is dominated by western values which tend to challenge traditional norms and values. Many of these young people tend not to take the church very seriously. Included in this group is the African intelligentsia, that is, professional people who are a very small but significant minority in terms of their influence. These forces arising in an [p. 95](#) urban situation tend to influence the church in various ways. For example, many of the African independent churches in order to gain recognition from the government and the society at large are beginning to lay emphasis on training their leadership. In the African mainline protestant churches there is emphasis on expecting certain standards of intellectual achievement in the leadership and some kind of cultural sophistication. This would be true of the Anglican and Methodist churches which tend to attract the educated group.

The city or urban life is both a challenge to the church and the source of change to her theological understanding of the new situation. For example, the fragmentation of African traditional communal life and the emergence of individualism is a challenge to the church, as that institution which can provide an alternative Christian communal life style. Louis Wirth in his classical statement 'urbanism as a way of life' stresses the importance of voluntary groups or institutions in the development of urban personality and collective behaviour:

*It is largely through the activities of the voluntary groups, be their objectives economic, political, education, religious, recreational, or cultural, that the urbanite expresses and develops his personality, acquires status, and is able to carry on the round of activities that constitute his life career. It may easily be inferred, however, that the organizational framework which these highly differentiated functions call into being does not of itself ensure the consistence and integrity of the personalities whose interest it enlists.<sup>7</sup>*

If one takes this statement seriously, then one appreciates the role the church is to play in an urban situation: the church becoming the context out of which communal forms of life are developed in order to cater to the needs of the individual whose life is subject to all kinds of forces in the city. The church as understand it is the liberating agent of God in building authentic, caring city communities. To illustrate this point further, urban life, particularly around the big cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town, produces all kinds of deviant behaviour such as the 'tsotsi', someone prone to criminal behaviour mainly as a result of the socio-economic forces of an oppressive society. It is in this context that the church has a role to play in providing alternative concrete life styles for such people. Many other examples which are typical urban manifestations of African life can be given, such as a high rate of divorce, especially among the elite, and decline of moral standards resulting in forms of sexual deviance and promiscuity. It is in this context that the African urban church is confronted with dealing with [p. 96](#) human finitude, sin, and is called to become a vicarious liberating, healing community of Jesus Christ. The partial disappearance of traditional communal life due to the socio-economic and political pressures of urban life causes the church to become that community; a community based and indwelt by the liberating spirit of Jesus Christ. Christ in a city becomes the catalyst that recreates authentic healing communities, and I believe there

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Lee, *ibid*.



are some African independent churches which are attempting to provide this kind of ministry in the city.

Urbanization brings with it many challenges and changes; it changes the character of the African people, in Johannesburg for example, modifying their culture and in some respects transforming, though not completely, some of their traditional institutions, such as kinship. It is in this change characterized by problems of crime, poverty, moral laxity, oppression, that the church is called to be the liberating activity of God. These problems arise out of certain socio-economic political structures of urban life and in this particular case those dominated by the ideology of white supremacy known as Apartheid. In the following section I want to look at the role of the African urban church particularly as it relates to the existing socio-economic political structure of the South African society. I have given this rather broad superficial background of the African urban church situation to prepare the context in which one can begin to understand the broad societal structures.

### **III URBAN CHURCH IN SOCIAL CHANGE**

As the recent events in South Africa have shown, the context of the expression of conflict will manifest itself in the urban areas for various social, economic and political reasons. It is this context of conflict, especially racial conflict generated by the political structures of Apartheid, that I want to examine in this section. The urban black church exists in a politically highly explosive situation, where the effects of oppression are felt most. The church is also, in this context, faced With the challenge of participating in the process of social change, becoming that which liberates human beings from oppression. This action is theologically not separable from the presence and the coming kingdom of God. By social change here, I mean the radical transformation of the socio-political structures, particularly the institutions of society.

The socio-political structures of the South African society are determined by the racist ideology of Apartheid. The political system is a white racial oligarchy in which all significant political power is vested p. 97 in white hands and this becomes the basis of social stratification by which every institution in South Africa reflects the basic segregation, creating enormous gaps in terms of power and economic resources between blacks and whites. Blacks do not participate in the political decision-making process nor do they have equal opportunity of access to available resources and facilities. Blacks who are in the majority and concentrated in the large urban industrial areas are the victims of this white racial domination.

The urban African churches which are an offshoot of the mainline western protestant ecclesiastical tradition (this description includes both the African independent churches and the mainline protestant churches) are confronted with many problems, particularly the latter, as they have inherited (from the west) certain theological understandings of how the church should relate to the public sphere. There is a clear distinction between the church and society. The church is not to participate in political activity—a view which comes from the Lutheran tradition of the two kingdoms which continues to be reflected in many African urban churches. Many of the urban African churches have inherited this kind of political quietism from western Christian tradition. On the other hand, many of the white mainline protestant churches reflect the racist attitude of the South African society.

Most of the white Christians, with few exceptions, participate intentionally in the oppressive structures of Apartheid, for whom they are legitimate and this is what creates division and gives rise to conflict, particularly between the young generation of

African Christians and white Christians whose life is a complete betrayal and travesty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The African Church, therefore, is confronted with a racially stratified society which permeates all the aspects of the so-called South African way of life.

It would be untrue to say African urban churches are not involved in the process of social change; they are, but one has to qualify this by pointing to what Max Weber calls charisma. All religious commitment to the process of social change is centered on charismatic leaders; e.g. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the United States. One could even argue that the emergence of the African independent churches in South Africa was the result of the efforts of certain charismatic leaders; e.g. Mokone and Dwane. Weber does not use this notion in the strict religious sense but refers to a certain quality which an individual personality has by which he is set apart from the rest of the group and given a status of power and authority.

African churches will participate in the process of radical change p. 98 under the efforts and leadership of their religious leaders. The religious professional, in the mainline and the African independent churches, has a decisive role in South Africa. It is represented by many young church leaders in the black theology movement which seeks to challenge the existing oppressive political structure of the South African society. In order to participate in a massive collective action by, especially, the urban African churches, the religious professional will have to understand very clearly the existing political structures and particularly the locus of white political power, which determines the life of the African urban community. Pieter van der Berghe points to some of the ways the political system operates:

*The following basic aims and principles of race policy have been shared by all South African governments since union: (1) The maintenance of paternalistic white domination; (2) Racial segregation and discrimination wherever there was any threat of equality or between white and nonwhite (blacks); (3) The perpetual subjugation of non-Europeans (blacks) and particularly Africans, as a politically powerless and economically exploitable group. The national policy of Apartheid is only the last phase in a long process of continuous strengthening of the system of white oppression.*<sup>8</sup>

Any religious leadership within the African urban scene where oppression is felt most will have to recognize this factor in the process of socio-political change. There is no way, particularly in the present explosive situation in urban areas, in which the urban African church can avoid being an agent of liberation. The church is called upon as a fellowship, as well as a social institution in constant interaction with the other institutions of society, to be the manifestation of God's liberating activity in the world fully realized and authenticated in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many of the African independent churches are not fulfilling this, the role which essentially expresses the purpose and the nature of the people of God. The emphasis of these churches not surprisingly is on spiritual liberation but not concrete liberation—for this, to use Weber's notion—is what I call a theology of catalepsy; that is, political indifference and paralysis. The urban church as an institution representing God's liberating activity in the world is called upon to be that activity which is in an intrinsic aspect of his kingdom on earth ([Luke 4:18, 19](#)). p. 99

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>8</sup> Pieter Van der Berghe, *South Africa: A Study in Conflict* (Barclay: University California), p. 110.