Re-imagining South Africa: Black Consciousness, radical Christianity and the New Left, 1967 – 1977

Abstract

This thesis places Black Consciousness in comparative perspective with progressive politics in South Africa in the late 1960s and the 1970s. It argues that the dominant scholarly focus on Black Consciousness, which is passed over as a ‘stage’ in the Black struggle against white supremacy, insufficiently historicises the deeper roots, and the wider resonances and ideological contestations of the Black Consciousness movement. As they refined their political discourse, Black Consciousness activists negotiated their way through the progressive ideologies that flourished as part of the wider political and social ferment of the 1960s. Although Black Consciousness won over an influential minority of radical Christians, a more contested struggle took place with nascent feminism on university campuses and within the Movement; as well as with a New Left-inspired historical and political critique that gained influence among white activists.

The thesis draws closer attention to the ways in which Black Consciousness challenged white activists in the late 1960s, who were primarily able, albeit it with pain and difficulty, to sympathetically interpret and finally endorse Black Consciousness. The thesis challenges the idea that Black Consciousness achieved a complete ‘break’ with white liberals, and argues that black and white activists maintained a dialogue after the black students’ breakaway from the National Union of South African Students in 1968. The thesis looks in turn at: the role played by the ecumenical movement in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s; student and religious radicalism in the 1960s; second wave feminism and its challenge to Black Consciousness; the development of Black Theology, and the relationship between Black Consciousness activists and the ecumenical Christian Institute; it closes with a study of the interplay between intellectuals Steve Biko and Richard Turner in Durban, and the significance of white students’ and Black Consciousness activists’ interaction in that city in the 1970s.
skin tone than the left. This visual abbreviation for racial unity and tolerance aptly embodies Nelson Mandela’s iconic phrasing of post-apartheid South Africa being a ‘Rainbow Nation’.3 The promotion of ethnic plurality is one of several strategic factors that have made His People Christian Church (HP) well known within the wider community of inde-pendent churches in South Africa. In such a contradictory way, South Africa is very much a part of a growing anity between an international spectrum of ‘born-again’ Christians (as exemplified by the Religious Right in the United States) and the economic expectations of a post-liberation society.6 This anity has parallels with other parts of Africa, including both Zimbabwe (Giord 1991: 46-80) and Ghana (Meyer. From the other extreme, New Left radical groups such as the Weather Underground Organization pressed for more confrontational strategies that included violent resistance, alienating their one-time political allies. Though neither Tom Hayden nor most of the earliest New Left founders claimed Jewish ancestry, the movement grew to include a disproportionate number of Jews, including Mark Rudd, Jerry Rubin, and Abby Hoffman. Scholars estimate that Jews constituted between one-third and one-half of the New Left activists on college campuses across the country. The Committee intended to strike a balance between the strident anti-Zionist influences growing with the New Left and the much less critical Zionist voices of Hillel and other Jewish groups.