

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH UNDER STRESS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA SINCE 1960

By

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The question of Christian involvement in political activities, especially those which employ bloodshed as a legitimate weapon has exercised the minds of Christian leaders of every denomination in the last twenty years. The dilemma itself is not new. Two examples will suffice. When Herr Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, it soon became clear to certain German clergymen that his murder might save Germany of far greater wickedness than the act of murder itself. Eric Bonhoeffer conspired to murder, was arrested and died in prison. One wonders, in reflection, whether indeed his action was the supreme sacrifice to his nation.<sup>1</sup> In the history of Christian endeavor, the case of South Africa never fails to raise extreme pathos. I am reminded of the late Mr. Steve Biko's "case against the Christian church" in South Africa. There, the South African government based its iniquitous system of apartheid on Christian doctrine, arguing that the Christians (i.e. whites) should not be unequally yoked with pagans (blacks). What is heart-rending is that, according to Biko, on the whole, the Christian missions cooperated with the government and helped make the bitter results of this pernicious doctrine sweet. "But we charge the white man's church for lacking . . . men of vision, for the fact that we alone had to win our freedom and to discover our blackness. Thus missionaries . . . diverted our attention from this world and its demands and turned it towards a final hope in the future, towards a heaven unconnected with this world. With their moral precepts of humility and obedience they extolled an everlasting life and death."<sup>2</sup> We can add a few words from Lord George Mcleod, moderator of the Church of Scotland in 1959-60. It was to this state of affairs that he addressed himself. Christian leaders in Southern Africa had said to him, "Without law and order civilization itself would wither away." He replied that "it was no good in the face of

(oppression) crying PEACE, PEACE when there is no peace. What we say, for the time being is that somebody must speak for the Africans."<sup>3</sup>

My thesis is that it is not so much that there were no men of vision, passion and charity in the Christian church in South Africa; indeed this paper will show that men of such stature and sensitivity have a strong prophetic tradition there, however, the dilemma is that the majority of whites have turned a deaf ear to the message of the Christian church, even within the bowels of the church itself. This is the basis of the stress the church is going through, voices crying in the wilderness.

The application of this doctrine to Southern Africa follows along the same lines. The details of the South African situation need not detain us needlessly. But it is necessary to emphasize that in a population of 25 million (1978) only 4 million of these enjoy basic human rights, the franchise, freedom of movement over 87 percent of the country, the right to property, and the freedom to job promotion. The rest of the population, 18 million of which are Africans, are condemned to a life of semi-slavery, a brutish and barbaric experience similar to that described by Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan.

The British Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office in 1909 was told of the brutal treatment of Africans in South Africa at that time to which he replied.

"I have endeavoured to find a single example where a great body of persons like this, a whole race, has been disfranchised in democratic times. If there is such an instance, I cannot find it. That such a thing will happen I cannot believe."<sup>4</sup>

Recently, the British Ambassador to the United Nations was reported to have observed that in South Africa, no amount of virtue, no amount of wisdom, of learning or skills and accomplishment in the arts or sciences would uplift an African from his position of semi-slavery. The significance here is that a man is condemned or uplifted, not by his own accomplishments but by virtue of his birth. In 1900, some shrewd Scots missionaries had come to the conclusion that "no worse fate could befall the African than to be thrown aside (as in South Africa) as a

useless factor in the development of the country."<sup>5</sup>

The present crisis in church-state relationships is generally dated to 1960. In that year, the movement for African political independence from Europe was described by the then British Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Macmillan, as having become "a wind of change." Macmillan confessed that the British government had until then failed to realize "the almost revolutionary way in which the situation would develop and the rapid growth of African nationalism throughout the African continent."<sup>6</sup> The massacres by the South African police of black rioters in 1960 and the consequent banishment of all black political leadership shows that even that citadel of white supremacy was shaken by the winds of change.<sup>7</sup> But, as Kenneth Kirkwood has pointed out, the catalyst was the entry of communist influence into Africa with the arrival of newly independent states. Secondly, the communists, by ideology and by technical training, encouraged blacks in the white-ruled states to resort to violence which is generally called "the armed struggle."<sup>8</sup> This point needs emphasis. Throughout their history, Christian leaders had championed various humanitarian causes, legally and within the free enterprise system. Indeed it was because Dr. J. Philip and his friends were stalwart loyalists to the empire and to the "system" that they were so effective. South African Christians, however, have to face the dilemma that by espousing needful reform, they must of necessity be seen to be on the same side with communists. The association between these two groups, which is unintentional but extremely embarrassing, is at the heart of the Christian dilemma in South Africa or indeed any liberal minded white.<sup>9</sup> We must also add another complexity. This association does not worry blacks in South Africa, who consider it a matter of the lion advising the lamb of the oppressive nature of wolf's character.<sup>10</sup> The Christian conscience we are talking about is a minority even within the white Christian community, the great bulk of that community believing that in natural law there are those born to serve, to be hewers of wood and drawers

of water, in this case the African race. Dr. Edward Norman of Oxford University, in his book on Christianity and the world order, ponders and wonders whether this activist Christian minority would not be better served if they concentrated on heavenly matters rather than earthly affairs.<sup>11</sup> With reference to South Africa, Dr. Norman does pronounce his fears, which I believe to be two, namely that with the advent of communist influence, the possibility of peaceful change is now ruled out, secondly, that whatever small and outdated changes may now occur will not be credited to Christian activists. I may have misunderstood his treatise, but if my impression is correct, these are fears with which I fully concur.

The history of Christian dissent in South Africa can be traced to the indomitable Scottish missionary, the Reverend Dr. John Philip, superintendent of the London Missionary Society (1819-1863) in South Africa. Space does not allow us to detail his achievements but he is associated with the 50th Ordinance of 1828 which in brief said that all men in the Cape, black or white were equal before English courts. This is the basis of the voting rights enjoyed by blacks and coloreds in the Cape Province until 1958. What is often forgotten is that the law was passed while he was in London. He happened to call at the Colonial Office and just to make sure, he asked the colonial secretary to add a clause saying that that law could not be amended retrospectively.<sup>12</sup> His fears were proven to have been well grounded: in 1834, in 1909, in 1928 and in 1958, the last one being the successful one. One can generalize then by saying that there was no love lost between the Dutch people (Afrikaners) and this militant wing of the Protestant churches.

The present extreme Afrikaaner Nationalist party came to power in 1948 and set up a commission to investigate the activities of these missionaries in black education. The Commissioner, Dr. W. W. M. Eiselen, found the government fears more than justified. The missionaries continued to teach skills even though they knew that blacks were not allowed to practice these skills in a "white man's society."

Worse still, they continued to preach the pernicious doctrine of racial equality even though the realities of the situation contradicted that teaching. Dr. H. F. Verwoed, later prime minister of South Africa, told parliament that racial relations between blacks and whites were poisoned by missionary education. Missionaries caused frustrations among Africans because they roused "expectations in life which circumstances in South Africa do not allow to be fulfilled. It is therefore necessary that native education should be controlled in such a way that it should be in accord with the state policy" of white supremacy.<sup>13</sup> While government support was withdrawn from black schools run by missionary societies, white Christian schools continued to receive support.

The banishment of the African National Congress and the imprisonment of its leaders in 1961 brought a new challenge to the Christian humanists. The black leadership of the African National Congress was almost wholly Christian and non-violent in ideology. Their incarceration meant that there was no organized voice to speak for blacks. Between 1960-1970 this duty fell upon the Anglican Church community. Leading clergymen of this church expressed themselves through the Christian Institute, a non-denominational organization and through the South African Council of Churches. We ought to mention that the English-speaking clergymen were joined by some Dutch-speaking clergymen, the most notable of whom was the Reverend Dr. Beyers-Naude, who in 1970 was moderator of one of the Dutch Reformed Churches. In that year, the Spro-Cas Church Commission was appointed by the South African Council of Churches from which I shall quote only the most controversial of its findings. While the Church Commission "itself cannot bring about the fundamental changes so urgently required in our society . . . we are at variance with those churches and Christians who seek to reconcile the Christian faith with apartheid." (pp. 2-3)

"All too often in the past the church has regarded recommendations and resolutions as a sufficient response to the needs of men in church and society. A faith

which does not issue in action is like a corpse." (p. 69)

The most far reaching conclusion was that apartheid which seeks to divide mankind into groups rather than reconciliation is in actual fact heretical gospel. "It rejects as undesirable the reconciliation and fellowship which God gives us. It thus calls good evil. It re-inforces the divisions which the Holy Spirit calls us to overcome. It is thus a form of resistance to the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> If therefore in the event of armed conflict between the state and forces opposing it, it was incumbent upon good Christians in conscience not to support the state. This is the most radical departure in South Africa to the spirit of co-existence between church and state.

I now wish to discuss the other side of the religious crisis in South Africa. The South African government naturally condemned this report as communist-inspired and placed the Christian Institute under surveillance. The Reverend Theo Kotze and Dr. Beyers-Naude, the Reverend G. French Beytagh, Dr. Alan Patton and the Reverend Cosmos Desmond among others were either placed under house arrest or actually brought before the courts for subversive activities. This of course can be expected. The most fearful development, however, is that the white congregations on the whole agreed with the position taken by the government. The Reverend Dr. Beyers-Naude was expelled and defrocked by his church, the Gereformeerde kerk which also suffered a decrease in membership in the ten year period of 1960-1970. The Anglican church suffered notoriety, which was heightened by the arrest of the Reverend G. French Beytagh, Dean of Johannesburg. From a total membership of 416,472 in 1950, it dropped to 384,448 among its white adherents. This decline is the more significant in that on the whole those churches which maintained a prudent silence actually increased their membership and therefore maintained financial stability as well. The church commission referred to earlier noted with trepidation that the "whites . . . came to demand that instead of questioning their beliefs and (racial) attitudes, the church should support the status quo. In turn members come to regard their church . . . not as demanding something from them . . .

On the contrary it is thought proper for the church to adapt itself to the group, not vice versa." (p. 28)

But this is only one side of the coin. Among black Christians, it was noted, "many articulate black Christians are no longer prepared to meet with white Christians," obviously because it gives them a bad name among their followers. Generally, the missionary led black churches could hardly keep their membership, others suffered through break away churches. While this was true for them, break away churches were growing by leaps and bounds estimated at an average of 10 per cent per annum. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Durban further noted that in religious as well as in political matters, the African population as a whole does not support gradualism any more. The most "articulate and determined segment of black opinion will not accept gradualism of any kind."<sup>14</sup>

How then does the religious and political crisis appear in the eyes of these articulate and determined blacks? They can be identified as members of the Black Peoples' Convention and the Black Students Organization, both of which have now been outlawed. Various documents, official and otherwise have been published about their perceptions of the truth. Their argument is along the following lines.

To many black people, the teacher and the priest wielded immense influence partly because of his higher income but also because of his European education which made him the go-between blacks and whites. His influence actually supplanted that of the chief or the witch-doctor in urban areas. The tragedy is that their influence was associated with (sic) Christian morality and their actual power with white supremacy. The open support of government policy by the Dutch Reformed Churches and the prudent acquiescence by others inevitably led Africans to the heretical conclusion that there was such a thing as a white Christian Church and a white god. This faith was identical with racial oppression. Unfortunately, white Christians encouraged this heresy by their behavior if not their preaching.<sup>15</sup>

Let me now follow Steve Biko's theology for a while. The old black leadership, particularly that of Congress missed the boat by identifying with white Christianity

and therefore a god dressed in a three piece suit. Secondly, white Christian leadership cannot make a significant contribution to the African struggle because they are part of the trouble. Their role is that of amelioration. The South African system does not need amendments but a thorough cleansing. White Christians have also placed their finger on the wrong problem, which they call racial discrimination, a view supported by the South African Council of Churches. "They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one," argues Biko. "We believe we know what the problem is . . . the whites are our problem." Further, Biko is opposed to reconciliation between the races (or intergration). Intergration would imply the acceptance by blacks of white Christian values, which up to now have negated the humanity of blacks. Thirdly, Christians are naive to believe that a compromise that is acceptable to whites can be found. "We must realize that our situation is not a mistake on the part of whites but a deliberate act, that no amount of lecturing will persuade the white man to 'correct' the situation. (That) all is well with the system apart from some degree of mismanagement by irrational conservatives at the top" exceeds even the bounds of acceptable naivete.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, one cannot avoid the fact that the young blacks of South Africa have already judged that:

- (a) The Christian faith is inextricably linked to capitalism and racism and supports these oppressive-isms.
- (b) That an alternative society will therefore have to be sought outside the Christian faith, capitalism and racism.

I will not bother this learned society with further details but I hope you will agree with me that I was justified in entitling this paper: The Christian Church Under Stress.



SOUTHERN RHODESIA

We shall now briefly turn our attention to Southern Rhodesia. In Rhodesia, all the paradoxes of missionary enterprise come to the surface. While it cannot be denied that the Christian church was so tied to the colonial government which the majority of Africans saw as oppressive, the colonial government too saw the church as tied to the cause of justice and racial harmony, which was subversive. After the South African government had confiscated missionary schools in the 1954 Education Act, the Rhodesian colonial government began to appreciate the subversive nature of Christian education. The black Methodist Bishop, the Reverend Abel Muzorewa reminded some African students that while criticisms of missionaries were no doubt justified, they should "not forget that white settlers opposed every advance in African education proposed by the church. White settlers never forgave the missionaries for making natives clever or spoiling the natives, so to use their terms."<sup>17</sup>

Between 1954 and 1965 the Rhodesian government made strenuous efforts to prevent the licensing of new schools especially those that provided for higher education. It is interesting to note that missionaries provided all the capital funds for buildings and equipment, in itself the best example of economic aid to developing countries. This attitude brought the government into direct confrontation with black and white church leaders. We can only summarize the areas in which the Christian church still provides the only human services in direct opposition to government wishes.

(a) By and large remote and primitive areas infested by tsetse fly (sleeping sickness) and malaria are left entirely to missionary service. "For many years," one pastor writes, the Methodist Women's organization, "supported and provided a clinic and annual support of a nurse at Chickwizo, a poor, primitive, and often drought stricken community in the remote north-eastern corner of Rhodesia."<sup>18</sup> One can estimate that about 3 million of the 6 million inhabitants are provided for through Christian service.

(b) In education, between 1955 and 1962, the colonial government "closed as many doors to educational advancement for Africans as it opened . . ."  
The Christian churches and their supporters began "to take decisive steps to actualize their prayers by investing significant sums in building schools, by setting up adult education programmes and by giving scholarships . . ."<sup>19</sup>

The ten year period between 1955 and 1965 marked a watershed in Rhodesian history. White supremacy came under a strong challenge, but the history of this challenge is itself interesting. The Methodist Church had appointed two Africans, the Reverends T. D. Samkange and J. Risike to principalships of schools in 1945. An observer wrote that this revolutionary step broke the rules of segregation by "proving that they (the blacks) were no less than Europeans in taking part in the running of their educational institutions." Europeans were however correct in believing that this was an ill-omen for white supremacy. The Reverend T. D. Samkange actually became president of a Bantu Congress dedicated to the advancement of the blacks.<sup>20</sup> This organization was superceded by the African National Congress in 1957. The ANC focused its attention on the land usage in the colony which was as follows:

Land available		96,425,840 acres
Europeans	population 260,000	land available 44,831,233 acres
Africans	population 6,000,000	land available 44,997, 731

(Figures for 1978)<sup>21</sup>

This opposition to white supremacy was recognized by the British Prime Minister in 1960 as a "wind of change". He wrote that the "most striking of all the impressions I have formed since I left London . . . is of the strength of this African national consciousness in peoples who have lived for centuries in dependence . . ."<sup>22</sup> When Mr. Macmillan spoke, 500 leading members of the ANC had been imprisoned and the organization outlawed. Some of them were to remain in

prison until 1975. The vacuum had however been filled in January 1960 by the formation of the Democratic Party which lasted until December 1961. When this party refused to cooperate in a constitutional arrangement whereby Africans would be represented by 15 members in an assembly of 65, it too was outlawed and about 2,000 men and women were put into prison. Its successor the Zimbabwe African People's Union did not last for a year and its leaders too found their way into prison. At this time two camps in the remote bush countryside had been set aside for political prisoners. So far, because the Africans had followed the rules of political conduct set by Britain, they had failed to make an impression. In fact since 1963, an extremist white party, the Rhodesian Front had come to power to find that the African population had been thoroughly cowed down by massive imprisonments. In 1965, that party led by Mr. Ian Smith declared independence from Britain illegally. Any opposition by Africans was insignificant, in all, five different generations of African leaders were now in prison. The significance of this period needs to be emphasized. While the blacks and whites were polarized, any possible and experienced black leader was in prison or in exile. Mr. Smith could therefore negotiate with the British government without any hope of contradiction from Africans. No black political parties were allowed, and had they been allowed they would not have had time to organize effectively. The situation became a desperate one in 1971 when Sir Alexander Douglas-Home, the British Foreign Secretary came to an agreement with Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith, could now boast of the "happiest Africans" in the world precisely because the most stubborn were in prison. Whatever agreement was reached between the British government and himself had a fair chance of success. It was unthinkable that any African organization could put up any sufficient and credible opposition. The British government was tired of the Rhodesian issue and the isolation of Rhodesia by the international community had worsened not alleviated the suffering of Africans. Lord Goodman, a close aide of Sir Alexander Douglas-Home also felt that any settlement would prevent a "horrible

and violent insurrection" on the part of blacks. In any case, argued Lord Goodman, the Africans had already been sold out over the past fifty years, there was nothing left to sell.<sup>23</sup>

What then was this constitutional agreement between the British Government and Mr. Smith which placed Africans in a desperate plight? In summary, white supremacy was to be entrenched in Rhodesia with the aid of the British government until such time as the Europeans, in their wisdom, through a referendum would agree to hand over power to blacks. These arrangements were as follows:

- (a) Out of a house of assembly of 66, sixteen would be black representatives.
- (b) The assembly was to be elected from two voters' rolls, according to income and education. The higher roll would require a high school certificate and an income of \$1,200 p.a., both of which are difficult for Africans to come by. The average European income is \$3,000 p.a., while that of blacks is \$200 and the majority have no measurable income.
- (c) By a mathematical device, Africans would "gain" two new seats with each 6 percent enrollment on the higher roll. This advancement would however stop when they had gained a maximum of 34, or parity with whites.
- (d) To sweeten the pill, the British government would place at the disposal of the Rhodesian government 10 million pounds for ten years for African education.<sup>24</sup>

The urgency and desperation engendered by these proposals among the African people cannot now be fully recaptured. The Anglo-Rhodesian settlement was signed on the 21st of November 1971 and on the 16th of December the British government sent Lord Pierce to Rhodesia to test public opinion.<sup>25</sup> A table attached shows that so many African leaders were in prison without trial and that others had been prosecuted and therefore sufficiently "taught a lesson" that by 1969 there were very few left to prosecute.<sup>26</sup>

There was no African political party whatsoever. Who was to speak for the Africans? Only one group capable of leadership seems to have been relatively

unaffected by the colonial government. These were the Christian pastors and it was said that should they decide to take the challenge, it would be extremely embarrassing for Mr. Smith to imprison them. That challenge was now presented in a most urgent form. In addition, pastors were better equipped than any other organization for their task. Despite government opposition, they still owned at least half of all the African schools in Rhodesia. Secondly, they need not call political meetings, they could use Sunday schools for whatever purpose they deemed religious. The churches also had their own printing presses and knew African languages better than the colonial officials. In January 1972 a "Guide to the Proposals for Settlement" was distributed by the Christian Council. The Christian churches through voluntary workers distributed 120,000 copies within a few weeks. When the British Commission reached certain remote villages, they found that the only propaganda the villagers had was that distributed through the local church, which was hostile to the government and to a compromise with white supremacy. That the African leadership, working through the institutions of the Christian church could have, within a period of two months, created such a formidable opposition to Mr. Smith was no less than a miracle. The British Commission concluded that "it was impossible not to be impressed by the efficiency of the African National Council machine . . . where we were prepared to go, so was the machine."<sup>27</sup> Even more shocking to Mr. Smith was the fact that this hastily put up organization had been able to convince the British government not to proceed on the grounds that "mistrust of the intentions and motives of the government transcended all other considerations. This was the dominant motivation of African rejection at all levels and in all areas."<sup>26</sup>

The situation has since worsened with the increasing success of the guerillas. The guerillas, though dating back to 1960, only formed the Patriotic Front in September 1975. Increased and better training on their part, political and military aid from the Soviet Union and Cuba has made them a formidable force.

Unfortunately, the war has been going on for so long now that the possibility of a compromise is out of the question. Bishop Abel Muzorewa of the Methodist Church, who led the formidable opposition to Mr. Smith in 1972 joined his former enemy in a remarkable turn-about in a "settlement of March 1978." Despite these changes, and the fact that the war goes on, I can only make the following conclusions.

- (a) Table 2 shows beyond any shadow of doubt that this search for equality by Rhodesian Africans has had its most successful periods when it harnessed the support of the Christian missions. Indeed, it seems to me that the movements themselves were a direct off-shoot of the Christian teaching. In that sense our second conclusion is a natural corollary to the first.
- (b) The Christian Missions served the colonial government but retained their right to serve as a conscience of the people. The episode of 1971-72 is the best example of such action in practice. This, in my view is a healthy sign and a good omen for the future. Even were the government to become an indigenous non-colonial government, the Christian church would still reserve the same right to serve as a conscience against oppression.
- (c) Various reports between 1975 and 1979 show without doubt that missionary churches still serve in their historic role as comforters and healers of the poor. As the Muzorewa-Smith government is further pressed by the Patriotic Front guerillas, it closed medical, educational and commercial facilities in the remote and primitive areas. The only people left with the ability and willingness to serve are the missionaries and African pastors. Few would under the circumstances in Rhodesia wish to serve in any capacity away from the protection of the police.

As in South Africa, the position of the Christian Church in Rhodesia is undergoing severe change and stress, but of a more positive nature than those affecting its sister churches in South Africa.

FOOTNOTES

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## APPENDIX

Table 1

Number of persons taken in hand by police 1964-69 (adapted).

Year	Restricted or detained	Prosecuted
1964	2,320	2,217
1965	482	925
1966	540	637
1967	104	369
1968	58	160
1969	14	19

Table 1 Section B

Christian groups involved in the struggle by order of importance:

1. American Methodist Church (sometimes known as American Board Missions).
2. British Methodist (through synodical resolutions).
3. Roman Catholic Church (through Commission for Justice and Peace).
4. Independent Churches (through moulding liberation theologies and active participation).
5. Others:
  - Baptists
  - Salvation Army
  - Anglicans
  - Lutherans

Table 2 (Appendix 11)

NATIONAL COUNCIL EXECUTIVE (1975)

Bishop Abel Mozorewa  
 American Methodist  
 President  
 Rev. Dr. Elliot Gabella  
 Vice President

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Rev. Canaan Banana  
 American Baptist  
 Secretary

Rev. B. Kachidza  
 British Methodist  
 Treasurer

Mr. R. Mugabe  
 Roman Catholic  
 Also contender for leadership.

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Mr. J. Nkomo  
 lay-preacher, Methodist Church

Contenders for leadership  
 Rev. N. Sithole  
 American Methodist

Executive Members  
 Rev. Max Chigwida  
 Mr. J. Chikerema  
 Mr. G. Nyandoro  
 lay-men.

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Founding Fathers (African Congress)

Mr. Aeron Jacha  
 Lay-preacher/farmer  
 1st President

Rev. T. D. Samkange 1946  
 British Methodist  
 2nd President

Mr. J. Nkomo  
 See above 1957.  
 President