

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 that his murder might serve 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.¹ At the Church of Scotland Synod held in May 1959, Lord McLeod, the Moderator encouraged that body to participate in the liberation struggle of the native peoples of British Central Africa (Malawi). He told the synod that:

It was no good in the face of (oppression) that. . ."Healing the hurt of the daughter of my people lightly crying PEACE, PEACE when there is no peace. What we say, for the time being is that someone must speak for the Africans. We do not say it to be difficult. (And). . . if I were an African in Nyasaland, I would rather risk sedition than allow myself to be further merged with the white minority in Southern Rhodesia."²

This was obviously direct interference in political affairs and the church felt compelled to justify its action to its followers. The special committee set up for this purpose looked at two volumes, prepared by the Church of Scotland in 1941 and 1945 respectively. The first volume was entitled "Report of the Commission for the Interpretation of God's Will in the Present Crisis (1941)" while the second was entitled "Report on the Nature and Extent of the Church's Concern in the Civil Order." In brief these two volumes argued that in a time of civil crisis, the church was obligated to choose among the contestants the lesser of the evils and to support that side. The church must be satisfied that on the whole, the aspirations of the party which sought their support were in accordance with justice and mercy. Applied to the policy of Herr Adolf Hitler, the church had no difficulty in supporting

Britain and her allies.³

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 existence similar to that described by Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan.

The British Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office in 1909 was told of the brutish 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."⁴

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."⁵

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."⁶ 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.⁷ 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."⁸ This point needs emphasis. Throughout their history, Christian leaders had championed various humanitarian causes, legally and within the ambit of 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ With reference to South Africa, Dr. Norman does not 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 coloureds 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.¹² 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 practise 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.¹³ While government

support was withdrawn from black schools run by missionary societies, white Christian schools continued to receive such 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."¹² 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 Reverends 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 Gereformede 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 Arch bishop 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."¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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 naivety.¹⁶

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.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bonhoeffer E. Letters from Prison, (English translation, London 1961)
2. The Deliverance of the Church of Scotland moved by Lord George Macleod, May 1959.
3. Report on the Special Committee Anent Central Africa - (Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, May 1961) pp 11-12.
4. Colonel W. W. Seely, Commons Debates April 1909 pp 1775.
5. Life and Work in British Central Africa March 1900 p 7.
6. MacMillan H. Pointing the Way (MacMillan 1972) p 133.
7. The Johannesburg Star 14th May 1960. See also Rand Daily Mail 10th May 1960.
8. Professor Kenneth Kirkwood, Director, International Studies, Cambridge University - Oval Interview April 1976, Austin, Texas.
9. Letter of J.S. Marais, M.P. for Pinetown, South Africa to President J. Carter of the United States (No date but written in 1978).
10. South African Nationalist of the African National Congress, Oval evidence. Name with-held. April 1978.
11. Hunt E., Christianity and the World Order (Oxford 1978).
12. Sales J. Mission Stations and the Coloured Communities of the Eastern Cape (South Africa, Balkema, 1975) pp 79-81.
13. Tatz C.M., Shadow and Substance in South Africa. (Natal University Press, 1962) p 145.
14. Hurley, D.E., Evidence of Dr. D.E. Hurley before the United Nations March 1977 No 7/77 United Nations Documents p 7.
15. PRO-VERITATE: Christian Monthly (Holland June 1977) p 9.
16. Moore B., The Challenge of Black Theology (John Knox, Atlanta 1974) pp 39-41.