

# South African Impressions: (II) <sup>352</sup> The Ecclesiastical and Religious Scene

by Russell Hill

At the end of my previous article I proposed to examine, in this one, whether religion might not be able to offer a therapy for South Africa's manifold neuroses, which it is beyond the power of politics to provide. The only symptom of neurotic condition which I discussed in that article was colour prejudice. There is another, related, symptom which is if anything more prejudicial to a healthy society, and that is a general devaluation of 'the liberties of the subject'; at least it is something more disturbing even to a conservative Englishman with a long tradition of civil liberties, free association and freedom of speech in his blood. These excellent microbes seem to have been almost totally extracted from the blood stream of white South Africa; and the fault does not seem to lie simply with the governing Nationalist Party. This Party has simply been much more ruthlessly effective in giving its actual and potential rivals a treatment of repression which it experienced itself from its opponents before it came into power. It has profited by, rather than induced, an endemic lack of concern for individual liberty. It is an ironical situation, and to underline the irony, I would like to quote from the political reminiscences of Dr D. F. Malan, the first Nationalist Prime Minister after the last war. He was talking about the question of a republic, as it was being argued in the '30's, and he wrote:

'As far as the vast majority of our white population is concerned, not excluding the English speakers, love of freedom is in their blood, because no people can ever wholly sever itself from its background. The Dutch ancestors of one section fought uninterruptedly for eighty years against Spain and were finally victorious, while the ancestors of those of Huguenot descent braved even the stake for a freedom which had still deeper roots. In South Africa itself they sacrificed their own homes as Voortrekkers for freedom's sake, they withstood savage and murderous barbarians, they founded and built up republics, and when this freedom was threatened and attacked from without, they defended it to the death. The English speakers on their side are also descended from an equally freedom loving people, who have not only made it their boast that "Britons never never shall be slaves", but have also been more prompt to grant freedom to their own subjects than has any other people that has wielded imperial dominion over other nations. With anything less than full independence could neither they nor their descendants ever be content.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Afrikaner Volkseenheid* (Cape Town 1959), p. 79f.

But the freedom of which Dr Malan here writes so generously is national independence, not personal liberty; and this latter is a value which only the 'liberalists' defend. It has taken South Africa to coin this depressing smear word. The deadening effect which this devaluation of liberty has on the general atmosphere of the country is undeniable. To be sure, there is a free press still, and you are not arrested for criticizing the government. But there is a general feeling that you only enjoy as much freedom as the government cares to allow you; that the security police have their eye on you, and can put you out of the country or behind bars for 90 days, or serve a banning order on you any time they choose. The result is not only to inhibit public action, but also to atrophy public spirit.

It is against this rather sombre background that we have to survey Christianity in this country. In general it can be said that like so much else in South Africa, it still retains a strong 19th-century flavour about it—which means that the general level of church attendance and membership is very much higher than in England. Let us begin our particular survey with the Afrikaans Churches. The oldest and strongest is the N.G.K., the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. There are two other Calvinist Reformed Churches, for practical purposes confined to the Transvaal; the N.H.K., the Hederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, and the G.K., the Gereformeerde Kerk, commonly known, I have not been able to find out why, as the Dopper Kerk.

Taken together, these three Churches almost have the status of established Church in this country—a *de facto* rather than a *de jure* establishment. That is to say, they are in spirit inseparably identified, in varying degrees, with *Volk* and *Party*. This is most true of the N.H.K., which by article 3 of its constitution is explicitly a Whites-only Church. It is least true of the Doppers, who are theologically the most old-fashioned and conservative, but also the least Erastian. Their absolutely rigid adherence to the formula of *sola Scriptura* makes them more immune to a political theology of strong social tradition. As for the N.G.K., its own dominant establishment certainly has very close links with the political establishment—the Prime Minister's brother is secretary to the Cape Synod, and a leading promoter of anti-Communism symposiums and so forth. But unlike the Hervormde Kerk, the N.G.K., like the Doppers, has a long and strong tradition of missionary endeavour, both among Coloured people and Africans in the Republic, and further afield, as far as Nigeria. Its mission church members, and its responsibilities in this field do sensibly temper its establishment attitudes.

Coming next to the Anglicans, there are, for the record, two Anglican Churches in the country; there is the small schismatic Church of England in South Africa, not in communion with Canterbury; and there is the main body, the Church of the Province of South Africa, which is in full communion with the Church of

England in England. It is often known, especially among coloured people, simply as the English Church, and socially speaking that is what it is. It has a kind of social establishment among the English-speaking people of the country. My impression is that on the whole it is more consistently high church, even 'catholic', than is the Anglican establishment in England. It too has a strong missionary tradition, and in such men as Fr Huddleston, Bishop Reeves, and latest of all Bishop Crowther, has been in frequent collision with the government and its policies.

Besides the Anglicans, the other Protestant Churches with which we are familiar in England are all represented here, the Methodists perhaps most strongly. The Presbyterians, belonging to the same theological tradition as the Afrikaans Churches and having the same form of Church organization, are closest to them of all the English Churches; but in no sense so establishment-minded. Six dominees who recently resigned from the N.H.K. in protest against its race standpoint, were shortly afterwards accepted as ministers by the Presbyterian synod. In addition to these denominations familiar to the English scene, Lutherans and Moravians are also well established in South Africa. In all these Churches, but particularly among the Anglicans, it seems to be the case that the clergy stand well to the left of the majority of the laity in political and social affairs. There are of course many exceptions in both directions; but by and large it is clergymen who do most of the Christian protesting that is done, and in doing it they receive next to no support from the White laity. It is pretty evident that Bishop Crowther left the country unlamented by most White Anglicans

Lastly the Roman Catholics; according to some rather old figures I have seen, they rank fourth in numerical importance, after the Afrikaans Churches, the Methodists and the Anglicans, in that order. They are, as one would expect, the religious body least tied to any one language or culture group; they are even beginning to have a slight entry into the world of Afrikanerdom, largely through Dutch and Flemish immigrants, who assimilate to the Afrikaans rather than the English-speaking section of the White population. The Dutch Dominicans edit a monthly called *Die Brug* (the Bridge), which aims at promoting dialogue between Catholic and Protestant —i.e. in fact between Catholic and Dutch Reformed. The Catholic clergy are also a far more international body of men than those of other denominations. Among Catholics there is the same range of political opinion as in other denominations, the bishops have taken the same sort of official stand against racial discrimination as have the Anglican authorities, and with the same lack of effect. But I get the impression that among Catholics the polarization of opinion is less clear cut clergy to the left, European laity to the right, than is the case with the other English-speaking denominations. Thus there is a lay quarterly publication called *Challenge* which is very radical for this

country; it wages an intermittent campaign against *Die Brug* for being too sympathetic to the Nationalists, and the latter is edited by religious. There was the poster incident outside Johannesburg Cathedral at Christmas, 1966, where lay people paraded with posters protesting against the break-up of African family life by the harsh laws controlling migrant labour, and a senior cleric of the Cathedral protested with a certain violence against the protest, because it was 'bringing politics' into religion. He was, of course, sharply criticized by *Challenge*.

Just one pointer to average lay attitudes among English-speaking Christians in the country, but probably a trustworthy one, was given earlier this year by a women's magazine called *Femina*. The editor carried out a survey on the state of religion and published his conclusions in a long article. This and the letters it provoked were very revealing. The Church is explicitly identified with the clerical establishment of the various Churches; one of the things apparently widely resented is the admonitory statement from the pulpit that 'You are the Church'. This 'Church of parsons' is regarded as a kind of service institution which the laity are prepared to support in return for certain benefits, rather vague benefits such as comfort and consolation. One could detect little if any idea of the Church as a body which requires far-reaching responsibilities from all who belong to it. Most of the criticisms were such as can be heard in any country—boring services, nagging clergy, ceaseless requests for money, harshness in the treatment of divorced persons, and so on. These are, of course, complaints which the clergy of all Churches should pay serious attention to. But the most universal and significant criticism was that the Church—i.e. the clergy and in particular the Anglican clergy—meddle far too much in politics. And in this country that means race relations. One received the strong impression that most of these lay people did not want to be reminded of the race question; they wish to be allowed to live their lives as if people of other races were no concern of theirs. They want to be allowed to worship in comfort, undistracted, as one lady, late of Kenya, put it, by black children with dirty noses. Of missionary concern there was not the slightest sign, and in this it seems that English-speaking lay people lag far behind the Afrikaners of the N.G.K.; very little sign, either, of any social conscience.

Such, in brief, appears to be the state of Christianity among the dominant group in South Africa. *State* is the word—it is a static, inert condition in the main; Christianity the dough, the heavy lump, not the leaven. It is a depressing picture, and it is said often enough that if nothing changes in it soon, we are in danger of losing the subject peoples in the country for Christianity. I myself would phrase the danger rather differently. *We are in danger of losing the White people for Christ*, even when they remain churchgoing Christians, because they are turning a blind eye to the true responsibilities of

discipleship. It is their souls, our souls, that are in the greatest danger, not those of the Coloured people or the Africans. We are in danger of losing these latter, not for Christ, but for the Church; already the independent Christian and semi-Christian sects among the Africans pullulate to an astonishing and unique degree. No country in the world has produced more sects in the last 50 years than South Africa; the number runs into the thousands. Here at least is movement and fermentation, much of it possibly the working of the leaven of the gospel as well as of the 'old leaven of wickedness and malice'.

To come now to signs of hope, there is also some movement and fermentation within the sluggish lump of European Christianity. There is quite a lively ecumenical sentiment abroad, particularly among the clergy and among Christian students, always excepting the members of the Afrikaans Churches. A new ecumenical organization among students has been founded recently, in 1967, called the U.C.M., the University Christian Movement (not to be confused with the Union of Catholic Mothers, which I have not come across in South Africa). It aims to promote both Christian unity and Christian social witness, and to include among its members and associate organizations persons of all races as well as of all denominations. In this it is countering a tendency that has been showing itself among interdenominational student organizations in recent years.

But by far the most significant force of movement at present at work in the South African Christian lump is the Christian Institute. I believe that it is not much known outside the country, and so a brief history of it will be in place. It begins with the Cottesloe consultations, which were prompted by the Sharpeville episode of early 1960. The World Council of Churches suggested to its South African member churches, which included the N.G.K. and the N.H.K., that they should arrange a joint consultation to discuss the Christian response to the race question in the country. All agreed, and the consultations were held in Johannesburg, by representatives of seven Churches, of all races (except Indian) in December 1960 at the Cottesloe residence of the Witwatersrand University. The N.G.K. of the Cape and of the Transvaal, and the N.H.K., which is confined to the Transvaal, sent representatives, who played a very important part in the discussions. At the conclusion of the consultations a statement was issued, which no one outside this country could possibly call revolutionary. It did not even condemn apartheid as such, but stated certain pertinent Christian principles that most Christians would regard as self-evident. Nevertheless the delegates of the N.H.K. declined to subscribe to it in the following statement:

We as delegates of the N.H.K. are grateful for the opportunity we had to listen to and partake in the witness of the different churches.

We wish however to state quite clearly that it is our conviction

that separate development is the only just solution of our racial problems. We therefore reject integration in any form as a solution of the problem. The agreement that has been reached contains such far-reaching declarations that we cannot subscribe to it. We can therefore not identify ourselves with it.

The delegates of the N.G.K. of the Cape and the Transvaal accepted the consultation statement, with certain clarifications added:

We wish to confirm (they stated) that as stated in the preamble to the Consultation Statement, a policy of differentiation can be defended from the Christian point of view, that it provides the only realistic solution to the problems of race relations, and is therefore in the best interests of the various population groups. We do not consider the resolutions adopted by the Consultation as in principle incompatible with the above statement.

They also expressed certain reserves on resolution 15 which ran:

'It is our conviction that the right to own land wherever he is domiciled, and to participate in the government of his country, is part of the dignity of the adult man, and for this reason a policy which permanently denies to non-White people the right of collaboration in the government of the country of which they are citizens cannot be justified.'

On this the N.G.K. delegates stated:

The undersigned voted in favour of Point 15, provided it be clearly understood that participation in the government of this country refers in the case of White areas to the Bantu who are domiciled in the declared White areas in the sense that they have no other homeland.

The Cottesloe statement caused a tremendous stir in Afrikaans circles. For all its moderation, it did criticize key items of government policy and practice. In the course of 1961 it was rejected *en bloc* by the Transvaal and Cape Synods of the N.G.K., on the motion in the letter of Rev. Dr Vorster, the present Prime Minister's brother. Most of the N.G.K. delegates to Cottesloe withdrew their support, in face of the storm of often abusive protest against the statement. Both the N.H.K. and the N.G.K. withdrew from the World Council of Churches into a state of almost total insulation from world Christian opinion.

Not all their delegates, however, bowed to the storm. The leader of those who stood by what they had agreed to at Cottesloe, who remained seriously dissatisfied with the official Church line on race relations, and who wished to keep the Afrikaans Churches in ecumenical contact with other Christians, was Rev. Beyers Naudé, who at the time of Cottesloe had been assessor of the Transvaal Synod of the N.G.K. In May 1962 he and his friends founded a new monthly *Pro Veritate*, ecumenical and bilingual as few other publications are. This periodical vigorously maintained the Cottesloe line,

and of course came in for the usual official criticism. It was sheer liberalism.

In the same month occurred the Geyser affair. Dr Geyser, a professor at Pretoria of the N.H.K. was accused of heresy and dismissed by the N.H.K. authorities; he contested their right to do so in the courts and won his case in May 1963. The real complaint against him was less his alleged Arianism than his criticism of article 3 of the N.H.K. constitution which excludes non-Whites from membership. While the Geyser court case was still *sub judice*, pressure was brought on De Naudé to give up his editorship of *Pro Veritate*, which was formally condemned by the South Transvaal Synod of the N.G.K.

In August 1963 Naudé and Geyser took the lead in founding the Christian Institute, and Naudé became its Director. Its aims were to keep open the dialogue between members of the Afrikaans Churches and other Christians, even when the establishment of those Churches were turning their backs; also, and perhaps supremely, to fight the dominant trend in those Churches which was making acceptance of the apartheid ideology practically a test of loyalty to the Church. The aim was, and is, stated in very Calvinistic terms, as one of bringing the Church and its policies constantly under the judgement of the word of God in Scripture. In the following month, September 1963, Dr Naudé was deprived of his status as a minister in the N.G.K. Finally in October 1966 the general Synod of the N.G.K. formally condemned the Christian Institute, and required all members of the Church, whether ministers or laymen, to sever all connexion with it.

But this final onslaught on the Institute and all it stands for seems to have misfired. The community to which Ds Naudé (some decline to accord him any longer his title of Ds, or Dominee) and one of his closest colleagues, Dr Ben Engelbrecht, belong refused to take any disciplinary action against them. The decision was confirmed, by a slender majority, by the Johannesburg Ring (the equivalent, I think, to the Church of Scotland Presbytery); and there the matter rests. Also in the course of this last year, 1967, Ds Naudé and Prof. Geyser brought a libel action against a Prof. Pont for an article, or articles, written by him in the N.H.K. Church paper, in which he suggested that they were politically subversive. They were accorded substantial damages, but an appeal was lodged which has yet to be heard. Finally, six ministers of the N.H.K. in the Transvaal resigned from the ministry and left the Church over the aforementioned article 3, and have since been accepted as ministers by the Synod of the Presbyterian Church.

All this suggests that the Christian Institute is having real influence in religious Afrikaner circles; its appeal and its protest is awaking uncomfortable stirrings in the depths of well formed Calvinistic consciences. An article that appeared in *Pro Veritate* just after the

N.G.K. Synod condemned the Christian Institute, entitled 'Has the N.G.K. become Roman Catholic?' (by putting ecclesiastical tradition and authority above scripture) put an *ad hominem* argument with a force that must have left every well instructed and sincere Afrikaner Calvinist exceedingly uncomfortable. It was written by a Presbyterian (English speaking) minister. It is also worth noting that the secular Afrikaans press, or at least its *verligte* organs *Die Burger* and *Die Beeld*, have shown no hostility towards the Institute, and this in spite of the fact that it has been liberally smeared as a front organization for Communists, and is publicly known to be under surveillance by the security police.

So there are good grounds for hoping that the Institute is acting as a live leaven within the most important section of the Christian lump in this country, the Afrikaner Churches. One excellent work undertaken by it must be mentioned before we leave it. The Institute is realistically concerned with the African Independent Churches we have already mentioned. It has promoted the formation of A.I.C.A., the Association of Independent Churches of Africa, to which about 300 of them already belong. And through this organization it is trying to cater for the theological training of their ministers. A more important apostolic work among Africans could hardly be imagined.

I want to conclude by asking what the clergy working among White South Africans should be trying to do in this generally speaking unpromising situation. What therapy should we, of all denominations, be trying to apply to the double neurosis of race prejudice and indifference to freedom of the spirit, which is really a kind of paralysis of spirit? The experience of the last twenty years seems to show that a therapy of simple official protest, from bishops and synods, and from individual clergymen in their pulpits, is not only totally ineffective but even tends to make the condition worse by infusing it with an element of resentment. Protest certainly has its place, the Church's official representatives must state their principles of faith clearly from time to time. But it is my feeling that what I might call current general protest is best left to lay Christians, for example to the truly admirable and devoted ladies of the Black Sash. It is to be noted, incidentally, that mounting their silent protest is only one, and not perhaps the most important, of the activities of the Black Sash. Here in the Cape, for instance, they run an advice office to help Africans entangled in the pass laws; they have a constructive programme, as far as they are able, to alleviate distress as well as a programme of protest.

While giving every support they can to such lay movements, the clergy I feel should concentrate their efforts on stimulating the social conscience of their White parishioners by presenting the colour question as a matter of social misery, of dire poverty in the midst of an affluent society, as a matter of scandalously inadequate wages and



broken families; and this not in general terms but with reference to actual cases which they know about, and which their parishioners could actually do something about. And as far as possible this should be done without publicity or noise by personal contacts, by organizing small groups of voluntary helpers, by drawing people's attention personally, not from the pulpit (or not chiefly so) to the serious social evils on their very doorsteps. Requests for help are of course going to be met with a 'What can we do?' response, with that paralysis of the spirit I have mentioned. To meet this, the clergy need to have rid themselves of this spirit, which is very catching, I may say, and be armed with practical proposals. And in addition to this, they could make an effort to get their parishioners to meet Africans and Coloured people on a personal level, get them to know them as people. This again is not easy; it is made difficult by law, by prevailing atmosphere, and by the very deep reserve into which the Africans especially have retreated. But it is not wholly impossible. A Group Dynamics movement, now well established in the country, in contributing quite a lot in this field. What is at stake primarily is not, as is sometimes said, the future of the Church in South Africa, but the salvation of the souls of White Christians in the country. And I think the prevailing tone in the country is still sufficiently archaic for that reflection, if it can be got across, to have some effect on the country's conscience.

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