

by Jerome Smith, O.P.

Theologies have always differed from age to age and from region to region. Since theology is the intellectual articulation of man's response to the Word of God, and both response and articulation are conditioned by the historical and cultural circumstances within which they take place, this differentiation is as right as it is inevitable. In the age of the great Christological controversies Alexandria and Antioch had each a special contribution to make: Alexandria a deep apprehension of the underlying unity of God the Word through all states, activities and experiences, Antioch an equally necessary emphasis on the real and full humanity of Jesus. Eastern and Western Christianity have differed in their starting point for an approach to the mystery of God since the days of Tertullian, the West starting from the unity of the Godhead and the East from the Three-foldness. Provided that the unity of the faith is preserved, such variations in theological tradition are an enrichment for the Church.

In a time when the question of the African personality is a sharp and even agonizing problem for the majority of politically, socially and culturally conscious Africans, it is natural that the question of a peculiarly African theology should arise. African self-awareness seems to take on a special, and philosophical, turn among those who have been educated through the medium of French, and it is notable that it has been the Congolese bishops who have called most clearly and ringingly for an indigenous African theology. The bishops can speak from the background of the work done by Tempels, Mulago and Lufuluabo, and of the *Missa Luba*, as well as the wider background of speculation about *négritude* in the writings of Césaire, Senghor, Diop and others. What does all this look like from an academic seminary tower in South Africa, and what opportunities and problems does it raise for theological work here?

Race-consciousness is the dominant intellectual, social and political force in South Africa today: it colours all life, all thought, all personal relationships. It is a force with two faces: one benign, the searching-out and coming to consciousness of a man's personal identity as an individual African or Afrikaner, Indian Coloured or English; one malignant, a surrender to herd instinct and the denial of the full and equal humanity of one's fellow human beings. Even in a seminary life and work are profoundly affected by the South African way of life and legal structures; this is seen most vividly and elementally in

the existence of two seminaries for the education of brother-priests: one in Pretoria for whites only, one in the country at Hammanskraal, twenty-six miles out of the city, for Africans and (for the time being at least) for Coloureds. The Church is faced with the choice between giving up any attempt at the formal education of priests and acceptance of the *apartheid* structure in her seminaries. Acceptance does not imply agreement, and the Bishops have made clear their opposition to all discrimination based solely on racial criteria; but seminary apartheid is a clear case of this, forced upon the Church by the unjust laws of this country. Acceptance can look very much like agreement, and can indeed insensibly corrupt and decay into it. Any suggestion of favouring one seminary over another, any acquiescence in different standards of education, board or amenities would immediately, and probably rightly, be interpreted in a racialist sense.

Relations between the two groups of students are in fact very friendly, and what can be done to create unity through visits, debates, sports fixtures, and common membership in societies like the Legion of Mary, is done. But even frequent meetings do not amount to a shared experience of life; and while both groups have much to learn from the other, the separation is felt with special sensitivity on the African side, since the European students belonged to the privileged white group with all its advantages in environment, upbringing and education.

There is one further significant circumstance to be noted: the lecturing staff of the Hammanskraal seminary are up to the present all English or Dutch. This has advantages and disadvantages. Since we cannot have a non-racial student body at least staff and students, living in one community and caught up in a common work, can attempt not merely to meet but to live and be beyond the racial barrier. On the other hand, even in the most informal educational establishments – and seminaries can scarcely yet be numbered among those – there is a certain necessary polarity and even natural diversity of interest between the formal educators and the students. This natural barrier is, in our special circumstances, always in danger of being interpreted as, and even becoming in fact, a racial one. This is a problem that can be solved only gradually, through the creation and harmonious working of a non-racial staff – laws and their application permitting. Meanwhile the position of a theological lecturer of European provenance working with African students in a racialist society is necessarily a delicate one.

Government policy demands the creation of two (and more) racial societies, each with their own structures, political and educational systems, and special community consciousness. The African society is to be encouraged to foster, and when necessary recreate, traditional African culture as the necessary foundation of the special, God-given, self-identity of the African people. By no means all of

this springs from cynical manipulation of human lives, hopes and patterns of living, nor from self-indulgent anthropologists' day-dreams: The Afrikaner's own history of colonial oppression, his struggle for the self-identity of his people with its own language, music and traditional way of life has been such that he genuinely finds it difficult to understand why the Xhosa people have demanded, and won, English-medium education, and why all Africans are suspicious of the Government's attempts to encourage a return to African tribal culture. But this suspicion and distrust are very strong, especially among educated Africans. Ezechiel Mphahlele has defined this reaction accurately and forcefully:

'Here is a country where paradoxes overlap most painfully: the ideal meeting point of indigenous character and idiom and the modern, as indicated by the modern Negro composer; the refusal of the white man to be taught anything by the African; the resistance offered by the whites to the impact of the Negro's culture such as still survives in his social relationships and communal responsibility, in his music . . . Then there is the fear of focusing the Negro's attention specifically on his indigenous culture in a situation where two sets of uncompromising political aspirations are locked in a life-and-death struggle; the dynamics of culture which are always urging people to assimilate and reject an environment. We dare not now look backwards, or fight a rear-guard action, no matter how much ethnic grouping white authority wants to impose on us. Even if it were desirable for us to piece together the shattered remnants of 'Bantu culture', the artist, the musician, the writer wouldn't wait for that day. He must go on creating.' *The African Image*, p. 39.

There is a clear and urgent need for 'the theologian' to take his place alongside 'the artist, the musician, the writer' in that last sentence, and in the common work of creativity; and it is equally clear that in a divided society only an African can do this. Our problem is therefore: what can we do to help bring this about? No lecturer can in any case create a student's theology for him; in our circumstances it would be the grossest impertinence for a non-African lecturer to try to create an African theology for the African student, even indirectly by insisting on the Africanizing of the student's theology, or indicating which elements in traditional African culture should be 'baptized'. Mphahlele states elsewhere in his book that if there is any *négritude* in the African's art in South Africa, it is there simply because he is an African. It is implied that in the present political and social situation *négritude* should not be consciously sought for. If theology, healthy theology, is always built up within a society and a culture, however much it may have to criticize it and reject it in part, such a condition for the artist will profoundly affect the theologian too. It is for the African theologian to discover how African his theology is to be, for him and him alone

to respond to the theological needs of the African people from within.

If it is not for us to create the African's theology for him, neither must we stand in his way, even indirectly. An over-emphasis on African culture would be one way of doing this, since it would lead to an instinctive reaction, not against African culture itself, but against its imposition by others. But a total neglect of African culture might lead to a similar effect; the formation of 'black Englishmen' theologians alienated from their own people. It is this alienation from the people that is really to be feared; 'Englishness' at its best is a harmless state of soul that a man should be free to take on if he wants to. In order that the African theologian's choice of self-identity should be both free and responsible two things are necessary: it must constantly be shown that theology is not of itself bound to any one culture though it can only exist within one for any one person, and theology is always a personal creation; and on the other hand, despite the traditional isolation of seminary life the African seminarian must not, in fact, be isolated from the African people.

The conditionedness of theology by its cultural situation should be emphasized from the start of seminary studies. We have a series of lectures for first-year students designed to give them some basic orientations in their life and work; from a consideration of the function of the priest in the Church we go on to a study of present liturgical rites in the light of their development, and to a sketch of the history of the Word of God in the Church where it is both easy and necessary to show that living theology is always a response to the Word of God and to the needs and cultural situation of the times. A sense of this cultural relativity of theology, within which, and only within which is its enduring truth to be found, should inform the whole gamut of lecture courses; and a sympathetic and tactful interest in the values and achievements of traditional and contemporary African societies should be shown wherever this is genuinely relevant, and this will be often, e.g. in history of philosophy, in pastoral theology, perhaps also in situating the celebrated (and problematical) question of Hebrew and Greek thought in the Bible. Lecturer and student will need the help here of a good *Africana* section in the library. Above all as the lecturer speaks, questions, answers, and enters into discussion, the students must be given a real experience of creative theological work; theological work that is scholarly and solidly based, and at the same time relevant and personal. Theology is learnt through an apprenticeship much like that of any other art, and only through the sharing in a genuine theological experience can one learn how to engage in personal theological creativity.

The traditional isolation of seminary life has always been lessened by the missionary situation. Our chapel, like that of so many African seminaries, has long done duty as a mass centre for the local people

on Sundays and feast-days. Many of the students share in the pastoral organization of the mass, and in catechetical works afterwards. Reform of the seminary system is in the air internationally, with many voices proposing a closer engagement of seminaries in life in the world. When these suggestions are made a practical possibility through reform of the law we shall need to make the fullest use of them lest the feared alienation of priest from people, all the more likely in our cross-cultural and cross-racial situation, should become a reality. This will involve many special problems, given the breakdown in traditional African moral structures and the fragility of Christian moral structures in the poverty, drunkenness, promiscuity, violence and despair of life in the African townships. But that is where the work of the Church lies and there, too, the other half of an initiation into relevant theological work must be served. The dangers will be great; may they also be fruitful.

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