

# To Suffer or to Reign?

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Because of the prominent role of individual Christians in South Africa who have opposed apartheid and exposed its brutalities, we are accustomed today to think of the South African Church as one of the most unrelenting opponents of racial oppression in that country. From the gadfly missionary Dr. John Philip of the 1820's to Dr. Beyers Naude of our own time, there stretches a tradition of bold prophetic speaking. However, a closer look at the role of the Church, especially from the viewpoint of some Latin American theologians, raises some disturbing questions about the South African Church's past history and present situation, the more so when the comments of those who are speaking prophetically today are taken into account.

There are interesting parallels between the development in society of the Churches of Latin America and South Africa. Argentinian theologian Jose Miguez Bonino writes that regarding his sub-continent:

“. . . there is no doubt that the Christian faith, co-opted into the total Spanish national-religious project, played the role of legitimizing and sacralizing the social and economic structure implanted in America. It served as an ideology to cover and justify existing conditions. God in his heaven, the king of Spain on his throne, the landlord in his residence: this was 'the order of things', God's eternal and sacred order."<sup>1</sup>

Protestantism was a late arrival in Latin America, entering between 1870-1890. Its arrival helped undermine the overwhelming predominance of Roman Catholicism, but in a way that far from liberating the poor, instead subtly imprisoned them further. It showed that:

"God was not tied up to the medieval, pre-scientific, feudal, aristocratic world. He was the God of freedom, culture, democracy and progress."<sup>2</sup>

Protestantism was thus closely linked with the North Atlantic ideological, cultural, economic and political thrust that began in the 19th century. But the freedom it brought, such as education,

<sup>1</sup> J. M. Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* London 1975, p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Bonino, p. 12

a free press, certain political rights, according to Bonino remained the privileges of an elite. The growing Latin American masses had to endure poverty, exploitation and repression. The advent of Protestantism helped to disguise a simultaneous neo-colonialism which turned the countries of Latin America into economic serfs of the developing world.

South Africa's experience was in many ways remarkably similar. There, too, the first Western-style society established over large areas was a quasi-feudal one. From the early 18th century onwards, Dutch (later Africaner) farmers began moving into the interior, a movement that accelerated after 1835 with the Voortrekkers. These men claimed for themselves huge farms which they ran in a manner both patriarchal and autocratic. With regard to matters of race, they had no doubt where they stood: Article 9 of the Transvaal Republic Constitution of 1858 stated:

"The people are not prepared to allow any equality of the non-white with the white inhabitants, either in Church or State."

In this case it was the Calvinistic Dutch Reformed churches that sacralized society,<sup>3</sup> just as the Catholic Church sacralized its counterpart in Latin America. The Africaners staked their claim to huge slices of Southern Africa, absolutely convinced of their moral superiority and righteousness. They saw themselves as a new Chosen People and an instrument of God's purpose; to this day there is a public holiday in South Africa called the Day of the Covenant, commemorating what the Africaners believed to be a pact with God.

However, other churches began to take root in Southern Africa, bringing an alternative to the Dutch Reformed faith. From the 18th century European missionaries had been slowly making contact with the African people of the interior, and founding mission stations; and some English settlers in the 1820's had brought their churches with them. Then came the discovery of mineral wealth, which provided the base for an industrial revolution that transformed the face of South Africa. Immigrants poured in and churches grew rapidly. These English-speaking churches (Anglican, Wesleyan, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and others of more diverse origin) found themselves sacralizing a different society, this time one built by *laissez-faire* capitalism. Mining magnates in their suburbs and mine labourers in their barracks might even belong to the same denomination, but they did not worship in the same church. Basic civil liberties remained by and large the preserve of the white people, analogous perhaps to the monopolising of privileges by the Latin American elite mentioned by Bonino.

<sup>3</sup> But initially no minister would accompany the Voortrekkers as it was feared the emigration would "lead to godlessness and the decline of civilisation". See *The Oxford History of South Africa*, M. Wilson and L. Thompson, editors, Oxford 1969, p. 407.

Surging economic growth drew huge numbers of blacks into the cities to fuel the industrial machine. Once there, black people found themselves doubly dispossessed, doubly powerless. Not only were they blacks in a society controlled by whites who discriminated against them at every level: but in addition, the policy of apartheid adopted after the Second World War declared that blacks *shouldn't be in the cities anyway*. Under this triumph of logic the poorest one-fifth of the country, its rural backwaters, were declared the proper (and indeed only) homelands of the blacks. Using this pretext the government stripped away what few rights urban black people possessed.

As the apartheid theory has been put into practice the screws of repression have tightened, since coercion has been necessary to ensure its acceptance. Individual churchmen have become conscious of the agonizing plight of the blacks and of the cynical way they were being used. Prophetic voices have been heard, prophetic gestures have been made, as Christians have tried to speak for the poorest and most powerless. But those speaking out have run almost at once into trouble on two fronts. First, there is the government arsenal of laws that can effectively silence any troublemaker. Second, there is the fact that the churches reflect the state of society itself. Most major denominations comprise people from all race groups. Their leaders tend to be white, and white contributions help keep the coffers full. Many white church members—and even some white church leaders—are bitterly angry if Christians speaking in the name of Christ draw attention to the sufferings and injustice in South Africa. Blacks who speak out in this way are at least understood by fellow black Christians, although not necessarily by the church authorities; whites may have to face openly expressed contempt from fellow-whites, and social isolation.

Beyers Naude is banned now, which means that he may not be quoted in South Africa and may not prepare anything for publication. However, in a recording made before his banning he says that the Church in South Africa today:

“. . . finds itself in deepest crisis. It is deeply divided on the issue of race. Convictions and aims of opposite kinds characterise those who call themselves Christians. . . . The whites in South Africa demand the maintenance of their material security and of their group identity; whereas the blacks expect an unequivocal commitment to justice and liberation. These attitudes today confront one another. . . . It is pointless to call upon blacks to be reconciled so long as whites are disobedient to God's call to act justly. The institutional Church in South Africa finds itself impotent because of this unresolved internal tension.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Broadcast by Beyers Naude on BBC Radio Four, 20 November 1977.

In the general election just past, many English-speaking whites chose for the first time to vote for John Vorster and his National Party. They chose to do so in the wake of the revelations of the degrading and brutal treatment that led to Steve Biko's death. Many of these white people will be practising Christians; South Africa's white population has a high rate of church attendance. Such white Christians are quick to rebut criticism of the state, quick to counsel obedience to it, quoting in their support both Pauline teaching and Jesus's statement, "Render unto Caesar ...". Their understanding of both is a limited one. Such a one-eyed approach to the Bible helps create what Gustavo Gutierrez sees in Latin America, a situation where the Church tends to be tied to the prevailing social system while at the same time claiming to stand above politics.

"In many places the Church contributes to creating 'a Christian order' and to giving a kind of sacred character to a situation which is not only alienating but is the worst kind of violence—a situation which pits the powerful against the weak ... Any claim to non-involvement in politics—a banner recently acquired by conservative sectors—is nothing but a subterfuge to keep things as they are."<sup>5</sup>

South Africa's Church is at a cross-roads today. It seems that nothing less than its credibility is at stake, as increasingly the younger generation of black people see how the Church is associated with the status quo. They see the impotent silence of so many white Christians, some of them church leaders, in the face of the institutionalised terrorism of the state. They see that the same people find nothing in their faith to prevent them living in comparative luxury, while fellow black Christians live in poverty. A recent visitor to South Africa found that young black people were disillusioned or even cynical about the churches, dismissing them as "a white supremacist trick".<sup>6</sup>

Of course, it must be added that there *is* evidence of increasing unease among white Christians. The Catholic hierarchy has made bold and controversial moves on such issues as integration of church schools and conscientious objection to service in the white army. And recently Dr. Timothy Bavin, Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, commented on the arrest of two of his clergy by saying, "It is hard not to react with anger, hatred, bitterness and despair when the first action of a newly-elected government is to persecute the Church of God. But the Christian may not give into these feelings and his prayer or concern will be not only for those who are being detained, together with their

<sup>5</sup> G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, London 1974, pp. 265-266.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Paul, "Why Black Priests are Worried Men", *Church of England Newspaper* 11 November 1977.

families, but also for the souls of those who wield power without respect for God and regard for common human decency.”<sup>7</sup>

Generally, however, church leaders seem to leave the momentum always in the hands of the government, and often give the impression of being caught off balance. The state acts first, the Church protests: that is the order in which events seem to happen. Rarely does the Church seem to seize the initiative. Ways need to be found of making prophetic and original gestures that dramatize the seriousness of the situation.

For those white Christians who do successfully speak out by word or deed, the road before them is going to be a very lonely one. It will lead them to share the experiences of their black Christian brothers and sisters, and in particular it will subject them to the same terrifying arbitrary exercise of authority. But as Beyers Naude pointed out in his broadcast,

“Never has the need for Christians of all races, colours and classes in South Africa to form a confessing Church been greater.”

This must be, he said, a Church which committed itself in the name of Christ to the liberation of South Africa from the unjust structures of apartheid. Unless the Church declared its solidarity with the suffering and hope of millions seeking liberation from apartheid it was in danger of being cast aside “as no more than a clanging cymbal”.

What this path could cost to those who follow it has been indicated in a sermon by a black bishop, Dr. Manas Buthezi of the Lutheran Church. He said:

“It is not enough for the church, for an example, to do something for the poor and the oppressed in this country; the church must also become the poor and the oppressed. This is the form of service God rendered when he became man in order to save us. He shared our life in order to enable us to share the benefits of his own. In the course of doing this he was maligned, harassed, arrested, beaten and killed.

“If the church is to render true service to the under-dogs of this land it must be prepared to be maligned, harassed, have its representatives arrested, beaten, and killed if that becomes necessary. There is something wrong in a situation where the church can afford to live in comfort and enjoy social and political respectability while a large portion of its members suffer and enjoy none of those things....

“The truth is that as soon as the church in this country identifies itself with the poor and the oppressed in their struggle it

will no longer be immune to the kind of experience which such categories of person are subjected to....

“The motto for each member of our church should be: I would rather suffer with the people than enjoy life without them; I would rather be nothing with the people if being something and somebody means that I should be cut off from their experience of life which is not their making; I would rather suffer with the people than reign without them.”<sup>8</sup>

Those of us who live in the safety and comfort of other countries can only pray that our fellow-Christians in South Africa will have the courage to commit themselves in this way. Those who do so deserve our fullest possible support. In particular, the publicity we give to them may be their only defence against the aggression of the state, and the encouragement we give them will make it easier for them to bear any isolation from fellow-Christians who disagree with their stand and despise them for it.

In almost every white Christian home in South Africa lies a potentially subversive book: The Bible. Subversive because it tells of how God loves all men equally; because it condemns those who manipulate and exploit the weak and helpless; because it reminds us that there is no real protection in wealth and power but only in obedience to God's will. Those in South Africa who choose to live this out and to seek to bring others to do the same face a difficult and uncertain road. It may, indeed, be a way of tears. But those who walk it will know that they share it with the poor and are walking towards a day when every tear will be wiped away. Their persecutors and critics will choose another road, broad and easy. But *that* road leads to quite another place.

<sup>8</sup> Inauguration Sermon preached by Dr. M. Buthelezi in Johannesburg, December 1976.