

Rhodesia Infelix: Fact and Fiction

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by H. G. Townsend, S.J.

Rhodesia today is an unhappy country. It is unhappy in its divisions, its rulers and the direction they have taken; unhappy in the international ostracism its white citizens have brought upon it and in the kind of friends they are making abroad; unhappy too in that its human and moral problem has been made a bone of political contention in Britain; unhappy especially because its Christian citizens by and large differ so little from the rest in their social attitudes and aims that Christianity seems irrelevant to the solution of the basic problem.

It was inevitable, but unfortunate, that Rhodesia should become the centre of a controversy that is assuming international proportions. Its problem is very much a problem of our time: a problem of acceptance of and adjustment to new social patterns and unities which conflict with habits of mind and living acquired in the past and the expectations they have engendered. To those who have enjoyed a dignified and stable existence with a comfortable standard of living, far-reaching social change, however inescapable in the long run, appears as a threat to their own and their children's security and, if this security has been won by their own enterprise and effort, as an unjust undoing of their achievement. When the required change is one of the integration of two groups of people so different in cultural background, experience and present attainment as are the two major racial groups in Rhodesia – the Africans and the Europeans (as all white men are called in Africa) – and when one of them is a small minority which has made by far the greater contribution to the build-up of the country and has enjoyed a privileged status for seventy years, its unwillingness or inability to accept the change is understandable. But is it defensible?

When white Rhodesians complain about the lack of understanding of their problems which overseas criticism of their attitudes and actions evinces, they have this much justification that criticism from abroad often betrays a lack of awareness of the real situation and a lack of sympathy with the difficulty for white men in Africa of overcoming their fears and hesitations to do what their critics, who do not face the same problems and anxieties, demand of them. In their calmer moments, I believe, many white people in Africa do recognize the justice of the more enlightened criticisms levelled against them from abroad, but they are less and less willing to admit it, even to

themselves. Their keen sensitiveness to criticism, the vehemence of their repudiation of it, and their tendency to create a myth in which they see themselves and those like them as a handful of righteous men pitted against a world of the unrighteous, all suggest that the conscience of most white people in Rhodesia is not wholly quiet.

The case of white Rhodesians is at its weakest when they pass over from vexation at misinformed and unsympathetic criticism to self-justification: when they contend that Rhodesia is already a multi-racial country where justice is done to all the people irrespective of race, that the majority of Africans are behind Mr Ian Smith, and that only the obtuseness or ill-will of Mr Wilson and the Labour Government prevents Rhodesians from solving the problems of their country step by step.

This is the usual line put out repeatedly in speeches, leaflets and pamphlets by the party at present in power in Rhodesia. That the great majority of Europeans accept it is beyond question: their votes for the Rhodesian Front (Smith's party) prove it. Their acceptance is understandable. It is moreover the only view which the strict censorship imposed by the régime on the press, radio and television lets through easily: any really critical view of present trends and actions is so cut in the name of security that it is rendered ineffectual. The number of blank spaces in the daily papers tells its own tale. But that a growing number of Africans accept the official line is, to say the least, open to question: there is no comparable proof. Political meetings are not permitted and the emergency regulations in effect prevent forthright criticism of the administration. It is difficult to assess the extent of dissident opinion. The story put out recently that a million African signatures have been collected condemning sanctions is not to be taken seriously. It is true that a number of European employers have been asking their African employees to sign; it is not true that many Africans have given or collected signatures spontaneously. It is moreover disingenuous to attach value to widely canvassed African opinion about the complex question of sanctions expressed by a signature while at the same time maintaining that very few Africans are mature enough to express a responsible opinion on other public questions by a vote. The official line on Rhodesia is based chiefly on half-truth and questionable assumption. For example:

(1) It is true that within the past seventy-five years the money, energy and know-how of Europeans have transformed what was open grassland into an efficient modern state with most of the installations of contemporary industry and technology, resulting in a rising standard of living for everybody. It is not true that what has been achieved owes nothing to Africans. They have provided a plentiful supply of cheap labour without which the transformation would not have been possible.

(2) It is true that more money is spent and more schools exist in

Rhodesia for the education of African children than almost anywhere else in Africa. It is not true that the same facilities are provided for African as for European children. In 1965 the education budget allowed £6,450,000 for 643,592 African pupils (or approximately £10 per head per annum), and £6,120,000 for 58,769 European pupils (or approximately £104 per head per annum). The children of the richer section of the community are thus more generously subsidised than the children of the poorer section. And of the schools provided for African children over 90% are built and run by the Churches, which receive state aid for the teachers' salaries. A small boarding grant used also to be paid, but it has recently been withdrawn.

(3) It is true that the European taxpayers contribute most of the revenue covering the cost of education, and therefore in effect pay for African as well as for European education. It is not true that in doing so Europeans are contributing more than they are bound in justice to give or more than they would be required to give in most countries of the world today. In any state the richer citizens pay through taxation the cost of public services, and this is everywhere held to be just. It is in line with the principle enunciated by Pope Pius XI: 'It is in keeping with social justice to demand from each person everything that is necessary for the good of all'.

(4) It is true that as a result of the years of association with the two northern territories (now independent Malawi and Zambia) in the defunct Federation many of the laws enforcing the Colour Bar no longer exist or are relaxed. It is not true that Rhodesian society is genuinely multi-racial. The main legal obstacle remains: the thirty-six year old Land Apportionment Act segregating Africans and Europeans in schools, hospitals, residential areas, farming areas and trading areas. Many white people speak of this Act as the Magna Carta of Rhodesia. Recently hitherto all-white Church schools have been allowed to admit some African children, but the question how this is compatible with the Land Apportionment Act is undecided, so that the continuance of the concession must be held to be uncertain.

(5) It is true that the present regime has been more successful than its predecessor in putting a stop to the thuggery and intimidation of nationalist youth gangs which have made the life of African families a misery. It is not true that it has succeeded in doing so without violating essential human rights. For in virtue of emergency powers granted to him the Minister of Justice can and does detain many hundreds of people (almost all Africans) in isolated camps on mere suspicion of subversive activities and intentions without preferring a charge, so that it is very difficult for the detained to bring a case before the courts. Subversion, moreover, is given an unusually wide extension. These temporary powers are renewed periodically, so that detention without trial has become a permanent feature of life in Rhodesia as in South Africa . . . It is only fair to add

that the emergency regulations and powers were first introduced by the previous administration of Mr Whitehead and that Mr Smith's régime has retained and increased them.

And so on.

The assumption behind most white political thinking, which makes for easy acceptance of half-truths, is that there exist in Rhodesia not one community of all the races but two distinct communities, African and European, and that it is not in the interests of either so to mix with the other that they grow rapidly into a single community. Already Europeans and Africans are closely linked together under the same legal, fiscal, economic and political system, a degree of unification which is held outside southern Africa to constitute a single community: only socially do the racial groups remain quite distinct. Wide differences of education, cultural background and experience make social intercourse between most of them difficult. But the two-community notion of so many white people adds to the difficulty and prevents a natural development in the direction of unity by encouraging among Europeans aloofness and exclusion of even educated Africans and their children from white society and schools. The result is that Africans and Europeans live apart, think apart, plan apart, and so grow no nearer to each other with the passing of the years. Yet this is accepted by most white people as a normal social arrangement in no way opposed to Christianity.

Apartheid is a doctrine and practice of racial segregation based on fear: fear of the white minority for its survival and prosperity. The past ten years have seen the end of many of the old segregation laws and customs, but enough of the mentality of apartheid persists to make the danger of their reinstatement real, and recent events have increased it. It is difficult to assign any other compelling reason for the unilateral declaration of independence (November 1965) than the advantage to the reactionary régime of freeing itself from the checks which the retention by Britain of a few reserved powers put on retrogressive legislation. The resulting estrangement from Britain, the isolation from the outside world, and the effect of sanctions have tightened the economic and emotional links with South Africa, the policies of which are finding increasing favour.

White Rhodesians often plead that given time and freedom from outside interference they will be able to solve the problems of the country. But the leisurely pace and unbroken isolation of the nineteenth century (to which such thinking belongs) is out of the question in the second half of the twentieth, and the attempt to live in the past can lead only to mounting bitterness and end all hopes of racial harmony. Time can solve no problems unless it provides opportunity for Africans to gain experience by close association with Europeans in all spheres of the country's life: political and administrative no less than economic, educational and social. The demand of many Africans for universal franchise may be judged premature, but it is

to this extent justified that it expresses their impatience to have done with the nursery. Their desire to be accorded the dignity of adult status is a natural and healthy aspiration which is dangerous only when frustrated. Valid judgement on the morality of the act of rebellion and of the sanctions imposed by Britain in an effort to restore constitutional government must take these facts into account.

Unfortunately, the African nationalist leaders have discredited African political aspirations in the eyes of most Europeans in Rhodesia by their refusal to cooperate with the 1961 constitutional set-up and, when they split into two warring factions, by the reign of terror they introduced among African people in their struggle to stir and dominate the lethargic masses. Added to internal disorder events outside in independent African countries, especially the Congo, have been far from reassuring. On the other hand Africans too are afraid and their fears are no less real. Developments across the border in South Africa are a warning of what the determination to maintain white supremacy can lead to.

The longer the present situation in Rhodesia is allowed to continue the more difficult it will be to effect a reconciliation between the races. Reconciliation is so much a Christian task that the Christianity of those who claim to be Christians but do not make it their primary aim must be judged to be seriously deficient. Most of the Rhodesian Europeans and many of the Africans are members of one or other of the Churches, but their concern for reconciliation, as shown by their attitudes to people of other races, is as a rule no more evidence than that of people who do not accept the Christian faith. Their excuse is that Christians living in Africa today are put to a far more exacting test of faith and principle than their brethren living in older countries where the social pattern has for long been more or less settled and is not likely to undergo drastic change. Comment on Rhodesia by Catholic journals and public men in Britain would do a better service if it were less concerned with the economic and political issues and more with the primary question. It must be insisted that the Rhodesian problem is not primarily political and economic but moral and spiritual.

What that means has been clearly indicated more than once by the Rhodesian Catholic bishops' pastorals, especially the joint pastorals *Peace through Justice* (1961) and *A Plea for Peace* (1965). Far from expressing complacency or a one-sided view of the situation, they point out the many ways in which justice is not being done and plead for a change of attitude: 'We hear much about our rights these days but little about our responsibilities as a supposedly Christian people. We surely have the simple all-important responsibility of at least trying to know one another if we are to hope to live together now and in the years to come. Yet after all this time the two major groups of Rhodesians, the Africans and the Europeans, have made little significant contact. They converse very little with one another,

and not only convention but the very laws of the country themselves preclude any immediate hope of their achieving greater understanding. In fact the possibility of such an attempt at mutual comprehension grows daily more remote.' (*A Plea for Peace*).

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