

Dehumanising the Black man

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This address was delivered in February.*

My daughter was asked to undertake research among African women in Durban and in Johannesburg. The sample included both married and unmarried women and one of the questions asked was on their attitude to marriage.

A significant number of young women regarded marriage in an entirely negative manner. They said they did not care about marriage as an institution nor did they think it was of any particular use to them. Some indicated that they desired to bear children and that this made it necessary to cohabit with a man but "the baby is going to be my baby". It was felt to be unfortunate that a woman is forced to have an association with a man should she wish to bear a child.

The main reason for this attitude seemed to be that young urban women regarded men as being totally irresponsible. I myself, through my own observations, have come to believe that the women in the urban communities are very much more responsible and more practical.

Successful families appear to be those where the women have the responsibility for the vital and basic necessities of living. We men talk a great deal about high sounding ideas but when it comes to the practical realities of living in our community the women bear the brunt.

My daughter maintains that urban Black societies are becoming matriarchal in character. I prefer to regard the present symptoms as a phase through which we are passing.

Some anthropologists have said that the traditional role of the Black man in a tribal society was to sit around the kraal drinking beer while his women drudged in the fields. This is not a true picture.

Men and women had clearly defined roles which have been distorted by our contemporary circumstances. Women may now have to plough because the men of a village are forced to move far afield to seek work for cash

wages but women were not traditionally downtrodden and oppressed. Their spheres of control and influence were pronounced and they would regard it as shameful and insulting if a man interfered. By the same token it would be shameful to a man if his wife went out to do the milking when he was present and capable of doing it.

The present irresponsibility of the urban African man is not characteristic and has no basis in traditional behaviour.

In the tribal society a man is the protector of the family and the provider. He is honoured and respected and may have certain priestly functions to perform. He takes upon himself responsibility for the welfare and stability of his community.

This man then comes into the industrialised urban setting which is bewildering in its radical differences from the society to which he is accustomed but this he could adjust to. More important is the fact that he who is a man is now dubbed "boy" in name and in practice.

The attitude of the dominant people in the new society, the employers, foremen, police, administrative officials, is all such as to make him a boy and to dehumanise him. Not only does he feel bewildered by this but his own family sees him treated as a "boy". Our sons now despise us for accepting this position.

Women, on the other hand, are protected to a certain extent from this traumatic experience. The employment they undertake is only different in degree. Their role is the same whether they are in an urban or tribal situation. They still bring up their children, care for their homes and very often their work situation is only an extension of these duties to other people's homes and children, whereas a man may well feel a fear of the unfamiliar job he has to do.

The dehumanisation of the Black man is not a problem of urbanisation or industrialisation. It is a problem of race and colour and the racial policy by which we are all ruled.

In South Africa the Black man is not regarded as being absolutely a man. There has been a progressive rejection of the Black man by the White man to the extent that the Black man is now regarded as a foreigner in his own country. It is surprising that women and children have come to regard men as boys?

But today what is happening to the Black man is an urge to assert his own value as a man, to take pride in himself as a Black man. He realises that it was a mistake for him to despise the tenets of his own culture. He is going to retrieve his dignity and no longer be forced by poverty and pass laws to submit to

doing work he abhors such as scrubbing floors and cooking food for his White boss.

We have all had a part in dehumanising the Black man. We see these things as a direct result of legislation but it is not easy for us to see our own role in the formation and maintenance of the so-called South African way of life.

I believe that the time ahead of us is going to be trying and testing for us all. My prayer is that whatever happens the lines of communication between Black and White will be left open. We may yet achieve a happy, united, single nation on this tip of our continent.

Report of the Spro-cas Political Commission

FOR THE past four years the Spro-cas Political Commission has been engaged in a close study of South Africa's political problems. The main concern of the Commission has been the problem of change in the present political system, and the criteria which have guided the investigation are ethical acceptability and practical feasibility.

The results of this sustained and extremely difficult appraisal are now available to the general public with the release of the Commission's report entitled South Africa's Political Alternatives. As the title suggests, the Commission has not come forward with a simple blueprint formula for overnight political change. The report represents a conscious attempt to get beyond the elusive simplicity of the established party positions and to formulate a theory of change which, by a multiple-strategy approach, takes account of the complexity of the South African political dilemma. I think that this task has been accomplished with a substantial measure of success.

Spro-cas (Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society) consisted of six study commissions. This is the final report to be issued by these commissions, and follows those of the Education, Social, Economic, Church and Legal commissions.

In all, these reports represent a concentrated and unique attempt to re-examine our national life and to propose policies and strategies which will break the deadlock and lead towards an acceptable and realistic accommodation of opposing interests.

It is in this spirit that I present to the people of South Africa, and, in particular, to the political leaders of all its groups, the report of the Spro-cas Political Commission. It represents a contribution to the solution of our problems by a group of informed and concerned citizens representing a broad range of political opinion.
Republic Day, May 31, 1973

Prof. A. S. Mathews

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