

A social casualty ward

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Cherry Michelman: 'The Black Sash of South Africa'. 198pp. Published for the Institute of Race Relations, by Oxford University Press. £6.50.

IF ever there was a lost cause it would seem to be that of the Black Sash of South Africa. Could there have been a more pathetic belief than the one which first brought the mainly middle-class and middle-aged White women of this organisation together, that by haunting various political occasions wearing the black sash of official mourning they could bring about a moral reformation in South African public life? Their faith was that the sight of this lugubrious emblem would somehow pierce the chainmail of nationalist righteousness and prick the consciences of the country's Afrikaner rulers into shame and repentance.

Yet from such unpromising beginnings these tenacious women have struggled through 20 years of disillusion to play a unique role among the harshest realities of South African life. From the ineffectual gestures of the mid-1950s the 1200 Black Sash members who have survived cheers, mockery, and finally almost total disregard now find their main task is to be Florence Nightingales among the social casualties in the shambles of apartheid.

The course of their conversion to this reality has been traced by an American lecturer in government, Cherry Michelman, in what first saw light as a doctoral thesis. Indeed her subtitle is "A Case Study in Liberalism". Her book, however, is an absorbing account of how once politically innocent women have turned from high-minded 19th century optimism to face the more brutal confusions of the 20th century. Some of the worst of these confusions lie in and around apartheid.

One of the main aims of the apartheid or "race separation" policy is to remove as many as possible of the Black citizens, who are in the majority in every so-called "White" city in South Africa, to officially decreed "Black areas", the largely economically stagnant tribal homelands. Daily it traps thousands of Africans in bureaucratic mazes that would stagger even the imagination of a Kafka. The only light in this man-made Hades is provided by the advice officers of the Black Sash, where the members labour to extricate as many victims as they can from being "endorsed out".

These tireless women do not regard themselves, or invite others to regard them, as heroines. They are not even very hopeful that what they are

doing is ultimately going to have any influence on the future. They are inclined today to accept Pastor Niemoller's reason for his lonely resistance to the Nazis, that to do what one considers right is its own justification.

But, then again, to quote Dr Michelman, "South Africa, in spite of many alarming parallels, is not yet Nazi Germany". It has a relatively free press, law courts capable of independent action, a (White) opposition, and some sharp Black and Coloured critics still tolerated inside the country.

The Black Sash leader, Jean Sinclair, still feels that, just as increasing experience of the social realities of Black existence in South Africa has changed the views of the Black Sash over 20 years, it will change the attitudes of most of the Whites. So the Black Sash continues to show up repressive legislation, organise protests, and issue Fabian-style pamphlets advertising the miseries of the Blacks and the Coloureds under apartheid. The question is, has White South Africa got another 20 years to absorb the lessons of this re-education?

The Black Sash are sometimes accused by some of retarding revolutionary change in South Africa by softening the impact of apartheid. Certainly its members are not supporters of revolution. They believe that, at best, revolution "would exchange White racism for Black racism".

Dr Michelman speaks of the "double burden of fear" of liberals in South Africa:

They see that the political and economic repression of the non-Whites, to which the White supremacists are resorting in the name of Western civilisation, is inviting the very holocaust the Whites so openly fear. They see the spiritual degradation of the beneficiaries as well as the victims of apartheid . . .

And what goes on in so much of the rest of Africa is not helping to increase White sensitivity to Black suffering, or lessen White dread of majority rule.

Despite all distractions, the women of the Black Sash go steadily on with their self-appointed task of providing what relief they can in the conviction that "apartheid is wrong and the suffering it entails is evil".

They have little hope that their work will be justified by any events in the immediate future. But one dares to cherish greater expectation for the long-term future of humanity because there are such people.

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