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WHAT CAN WE DO? THE WHITE MAN'S POINT OF VIEW

By R. T. HOFMEYR



I SHOULD like to say at the outset that this will be a rather personal contribution. Our attitudes to the people around us are the product of a complex set of inter-reacting circumstances and experiences, and it takes a brave man to spell out exactly what White South Africa, as a whole, should do about the issues discussed at this conference. There are, however, certain simple guideposts that we cannot ignore without losing our way completely, and these are the things I want to talk about.

Formulating values

I feel the first thing we must do is to get our own values straight as individuals. Unless we have some clearly formulated philosophy of interpersonal relations, we may find ourselves an easy prey to the specious arguments that assail us and the bigotry and prejudice that are so rife in South Africa.

There are certain things that are crucial.

First of all we must surely accept the concept that every human being has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Secondly, we must recognize the fact that every human being has needs that must be satisfied. Here we think not only of biological needs but of the equally important social needs — the need of a person to feel secure from harsh and arbitrary invasion of his rights; the need for approval and recognition; the need to be accepted by those around him; the need to realize the potentialities that lie within him. We must realize also that a man's feeling of self-esteem is vital and that he can make his proper contribution in society only when his feeling of self-esteem — of amounting to something — is maintained or enhanced by the actions of those around him.

In the third place, we must reject the

‘herrenvolk’ concept, the belief that one race or nation is inherently superior to any other.

We must believe fervently that it is character and not colour that counts.

We must concern ourselves with individuals and not stereotypes. Nothing militates more against sane thinking than the belief that all Americans are brash or that all Africans are ungrateful.

We must recognize that deprivation of the rights of those around us is our intimate concern and a source of humiliation to all of us.

We must believe, finally, that courtesy and consideration are due to every man, and that to assault a man's dignity is one of the more vicious sins.

Fantastic jig-saw

Having formulated our own philosophy regarding our behaviour towards our fellow men, we must next see how it accords with the race relations situation as it confronts us in South Africa today. Although this conference is devoted to a consideration of migratory labour, I am going to regard it as just another piece of the fantastic jig-saw that is taking shape in our country. The legislation that makes labour migratory stems, after all, from the same philosophy that creates

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job reservation, withholds bargaining rights, declares group areas and manifests in a thousand and one ways White South Africa's attitude to the man of colour.

Let us examine, then, the attitude of the present government and the vast majority of White South Africans towards our Black fellow-citizens. The feeling quite clearly is that the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is very much the prerogative of the White man; that the African has no right to feel secure — on the contrary he can be endorsed out at the stroke of a pen. His right to realize his potentialities and take his rightful place in society is limited to some Bantustan with which he may have no links whatsoever. As for his self-esteem, the feeling seems to be that it is presumptuous of him to have such a thing.

Stereotyped thinking

The 'herrenvolk' mentality is everywhere. The government can talk itself blue in the face about separate development but basically its whole policy is one of discrimination.

The place a man takes in society is not determined by his character or merit. Basically his colour is the deciding factor.

White South Africa does not concern itself with individuals — it thinks in stereotypes all the time. The African is not to be trusted; he is incapable of showing gratitude; he is primitive; any polish or sophistication he may acquire is no more than a veneer; give him an inch and he'll take a mile,

and so on. The product of this stereotype thinking is that Africans become regarded as so many chattels to be herded, exploited and circumscribed as the Government dictates.

Far from recognizing his human dignity, we treat him with anything from feudal paternalism to outright contempt.

Against the background sketched above we are now confronted with a crucial decision. We can shrug our shoulders and declare ourselves powerless to do anything about it in the face of the tremendous forces ranged against us. Too often, and I say it to my shame, this is the defeatist attitude I myself take. Our alternative is to do something about it, and these are some of the small practical things that present themselves.

Plan of action

Firstly, we can get our own inter-personal relations with our fellow-citizens right, and this is no easy task in the climate of fear and prejudice in which we pass our days.

Secondly, we can indoctrinate our children. It is a thousand pities that this has to be done, but since there is no lack of indoctrination on the other side we have no option but to retaliate. How do we indoctrinate them? We must let no act of discourtesy towards an African pass unchallenged. We must try to transmit to them the set of values which I outlined at the start of my talk; and — though this is not pleasant — we must convince them that Whites who take the opposite view are either misguided or immoral or both.

We can try in our work situation to develop healthier attitudes to men of colour, and seek out opportunities of using something approaching their full range of talents and abilities instead of a small fraction of what they have to offer.

We can associate ourselves actively and positively with people holding similar views so that our voice may not go unheard in South Africa and the outside world.

We must remind ourselves constantly that such responsibility and status as we enjoy have not been earned in fair competition with all South Africans; that by virtue of the colour or our skin, we are in a privileged position. This to me is one of the most humiliating things of all and I cannot rest content until this unhappy situation is remedied and I find my true level on the basis of the talents I possess.

(Continued overleaf)

WHAT CAN WE DO? (Cont.)

We must understand our African fellow-citizens' motivations, aspirations and reactions, and try to appreciate the extent to which their behaviour is the product of the frustrations to which they are subjected.

We must realize constantly that we all have a contribution to make towards an enriching relationship with one another — some by virtue of their cultural background and their knowledge; others by virtue of their vitality, cheerfulness and tolerance. And heaven knows there are many Africans who possess these qualities in rich measure.

Challenge

The last thing we can do is to harass the enemy, and we can do it in many ways.

We can challenge and fight the equivocator who searches feverishly for some sort of ethical justification for the discrimination which he practises. I can live with the man who admits quite frankly that there is no moral justification for the doctrine of White supremacy that he espouses, but I cannot abide the person who silences his conscience and persuades himself that it is perfectly ethical to maintain the White man's privilege.

We can fight the sections of the Press that studiously avoid the use of the term "African" or cannot bring themselves to prefixing the word "Mister" to an African's name.

We can fight the individual who feels that he demeans himself by shaking hands with an African or regards a well-dressed African as an affront to the White man.

We can fight the patronage one so frequently encounters among people who say "look how well I treat my servants" and then believe with the greatest smugness that they have discharged their duties in the race relations field.

These things we can do and more besides. If we fail to do them we must accept the possibility of falling into a state of moral decay.

You see, so many of us seem to feel that race relations in South Africa are a political issue and are subject as such to a rather special set of rules. They are political issues, it is true, but even more are they moral issues. Unless we accept this fact and are prepared to place our laws and our practices on the firm ground of fair dealing, we must be prepared to sink deeper and deeper into the morass that constantly threatens to engulf us.

AFRICAN WAGES

SOUTH AFRICA is surely the only country in the world which imports two-thirds of the unskilled labour required in its major industry.

Africans in the Republic will remain reluctant to work in the mines until wages and conditions are improved.

The present low wages are due to two main factors. The first is the belief that the Native reserves can be relied on to subsidize the wages paid to Africans. Yet everyone who has looked into the question knows how poverty-stricken the reserves really are and how hard and costly it is to reconstruct them.

Years ago the Lansdown Commission declared that "the combined income of the mine worker from his wages and his allotment of land in the reserves should be such as to provide him with a proper livelihood, to enable him to maintain family life and tribal association, good health and the control of his land".

To this day, however, mine wages, plus income produced in the reserves, are far from giving Africans a decent minimum standard of living.

The second factor which keeps wages low is the opposition of the mine owners to trade unionism. It is rather late in human history to have to reassure the fearful that trade unions are not dangerous radical organizations determined to destroy the industry which employs them, and that Africans in industry are not as primitive and irresponsible as Europeans are inclined to imagine.

But perhaps I may be allowed to recall that 20 years ago when a trade union for African miners on the copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia was first advocated, men of experience said to me, with a patronizing smile, that it would take 100 years to come. In fact, however, it took less than ten years for an African trade union to come — and to become a respectable and rather conservative body accepted on all sides. Nor did its coming ruin the copper mines.

Only when Africans are granted the universal human right of collective bargaining (which all European workmen can exercise) will the question of wages be determined in the way it should be, which is by full consideration of all the issues by all concerned.

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