

Introductory essay:

Pro Veritate

Beyers Naude

Pro Veritate is the story of Christian people who were right to think the Church was wrong. Their convictions challenged and defied the Church for 15 years; they were outlawed and banned from existence by the Government for 20 years with the support of the Church; and then the Church repented, saying: 'You were right and we were wrong.' This archive records the story of those fifteen years of conviction and challenge, hope and faith, for truth.

Dominee Christiaan Frederick Beyers Naude was set for high office in the Afrikaner Church and Volk when three factors destroyed his willingness to follow the apartheid philosophy. Firstly, he became constrained to question the scriptural and theological support which was given to apartheid by the NGK. A long and often reluctant study convinced him that the doctrine was false. But he kept it to himself. Secondly, appointed to a leadership role in the Transvaal NGK (1958) he was asked by ministers working with Coloured Indian and African people to visit their congregations and was utterly shocked at the conditions under which apartheid forced 'non-whites' to live. He concluded that 'If this is what apartheid is all about it is evil. It is inhuman, it is something that cannot be supported'. Quietly, (1959), he became involved in Bible Study Groups to enquire into the scriptural validity of apartheid. But again, he did no more about it. Then came 21 March 1960. The African Liberation Movements, ANC and PAC, called on people to demonstrate their rejection of the Pass Laws by leaving their passes at home and presenting themselves for arrest at the Police Station. At Sharpeville, near Vereeniging, police opened fire on the crowd. 186 were wounded and 69 were shot dead, many in the back as they ran for cover. The world woke up and so did Beyers Naude. 'There was no way in which I could get out of it any longer', he told Dorothy Solle in Germany, 25 years later.

A State of Emergency was declared. The ANC and PAC were banned and went underground. Nine months later a multi-racial and inter-denominational Conference initiated by the World Council of Churches took place in the Johannesburg suburb of Cottesloe, and was critical of apartheid. A storm of rejection from the Government and the NGK Synod followed and scores of dominees who had attended the Bible Study groups were intimidated to desert them. The small group who remained, committed to finding and spreading theological truths about racial and political issues in South Africa, and convinced of the need to proclaim the unity of Christian truth, decided to pool their pennies and produce a monthly journal about it. Pro Veritate appeared on 15 May 1962, with Beyers Naude as Editor

The bi-lingual monthly journal (R2 in South Africa, R2.50 overseas, per annum) began where the Bible Study groups had been, demolishing the scriptural and theological basis of apartheid, mostly in Afrikaans, and clearly in conflict with the inherited 'Christian National' politics of the Government.

A year later, on 13 August 1963, a wider group from all churches met at Johannesburg Central Methodist Church to discuss the formation of a multi-racial inter-denominational institute. The Christian Institute was officially launched on 15 December 1963, Beyers Naude speaking on 'Reconciliation', and calling for obedience to God in the creation of a new and just order in the land. Forced by the Church to choose between the CI and Pro Veritate, or his pastorate, Beyers preached his farewell sermon to a distraught congregation in November 1963, formally taking off his black gown as a sign of the stripping of his status.

Despite its earlier origin and separate structure Pro Veritate, the 'Christian Journal for South Africa', was seen as the voice of the Christian Institute in whose offices it was mostly written and produced. It chronicled the concerns and activities of the Christian witness for the next decade and a half. Rejecting the false theology and practices of apartheid in the church and the land, it was ecumenical from the start. It recognised that beyond the witness and actions of courageous individuals in the various churches, obedience to God on South African soil required major action outside the official church structures. Its theology led to the quest for united Christian activity in politics and social concerns and turning the pages of Pro Veritate today recalls the history of that great struggle for liberation.

Books have been written on those years of overcoming oppression, but none can capture the lively immediacy of Pro Veritate as month by month successive editors sketched the signs of their times. The spotlight of truth illumined one area of concern after another, from the first narrow beam rejecting the scriptural basis of oppression, to the full orb picture of a country seeking liberation into a new way of life altogether.

The re-understanding of scripture and apartheid was an ecumenical venture, and Pro Veritate soon featured articles from prominent leaders in other churches, despite the criticisms. (The appointment of Margaret Malherbe, a Catholic, to the CI Board triggered much criticism. 'But are Catholics really Christian?' a Boksburg dominee asked me in 1965. Professor AD Pont of Pretoria University said Pro Veritate was 'a liberalist stepping stone from which propaganda which suits Communism admirably is carried into our churches'.)

Pro Veritate chronicled the re-forming of the Christian Council of South Africa into the South African Council of Churches, and the joint CI-SACC initiative to produce 'The Message to the People of South Africa' in 1968 which denounced apartheid as 'a false gospel'. Pro Veritate, quoting the German experience, wondered if South Africa should advocate 'a confessing church'. PV, CI, and SACC all operated from Diakonia House in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

Beyers report on his visit to the Mindolo Conference on Race Relations in Zambia in May 1964 widened the vision of Pro Veritate. From 1965 onwards it featured the positive relationship of the Christian Institute with the huge African Independent Church constituency.

One of the most profound developments in the Christian Institute and Pro Veritate was to bring together the thinking of blacks and whites on oppression and liberation. The University Christian Movement opened the door to the Black Theology Conference of 1967, and the Black Consciousness Movement. Black Christians were increasingly published.

SPROCAS began in 1969, and was given full treatment in Pro Veritate. This 'Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society', sponsored by the CI and SACC, led by Peter Randall, sought to link the critical 'Message' to positive alternatives to apartheid in the economic, educational, church, legal and social fields.

External influences also enlivened the pages of Pro Veritate, especially the 1969 'Programme to Combat Racism' (PCR) of the World Council of Churches, which counseled aid to liberation movements. Huge controversies erupted in the South African Churches, with Pro Veritate warning of the impending violence if apartheid continued, and seeking to move both Church and State from war thinking to peace thinking.

State Opposition continued to mount. Pro Veritate in 1972 named 100 prominent Christians who had been detained, refused passports, searched, intimidated or forced to leave the country. CI offices were searched, personnel attacked, and issues of Pro Veritate banned.

In 1975, Government appointed the Schlebusch Commission to enquire into the Christian Institute and Pro Veritate, which it concluded 'had consistently conditioned public opinion to accept a possible, even an inevitable, violent change in the existing order' ... and condemned some of its activities as 'a danger to the State.' Two days later, Government applied the Affected Organisations Act to prevent Pro Veritate and the Christian Institute receiving funds from abroad, demanding major changes. The physical appearance of Pro Veritate is itself a commentary on the struggle. The first issues are in newspaper format; it became a journal with hard glossy covers; and in the latter years of financial strain was back to the cheapest newsprint available: but the witness to truth remained.

In June 1976 Soweto students set off protests that involved over a hundred major demonstrations throughout the country. In November, a major raid took place on the Christian Institute, the November issue of Pro Veritate was confiscated and its editor detained. That issue had called for a National Convention of blacks and whites, and reported the CI Board's support for liberation movements 'as far as their aims accord with the biblical values of justice, freedom and human responsibilities.'

A few months later, Steve Biko had been killed in Police Custody, Pro Veritate, the Christian Institute and the leading staff members had all been banned, and the offices in Diakonia House in Braamfontein had been taken over by the Security Police. Sixteen years after it began to refute the false gospel of apartheid, the last issue of Pro Veritate lay on the table, with Steve Biko's photograph on the front cover.

Pro Veritate highlighted three contrary attitudes within the Christian Community, which still prevail. The first is to support oppression by misusing Scripture, which was the dominant attitude of the conservative white churches. The second is to support liberation, but take no decisive or relevant action, which was the dominant attitude of most English speaking churches. The third is to believe that the God known in Jesus, whilst not particularly religious, is concerned to bring the Good News of a transformed way of life to the whole society of human beings, acting in all who seek liberation into justice and peace, harmony and wholeness. The struggle continues.