

THE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE AND BLACK SOUTH AFRICA

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ANY ATTEMPT to make an estimate of the significance of non-racial organisations like the Christian Institute for Blacks will have to take seriously the existence of an ambivalent attitude a growing number of articulate blacks have towards anything that smacks of white domination or white participation, for that matter.

If this turn of events is disturbing to some 'sincere christians' it is also a fair reflection of the confused situation the church finds itself in. Many sincere and even powerful white believers mix together in one christian porridge, love and race discrimination; christian fellowship and the programme of the separation of races. It is quite a holy menu! No wonder that many, including the heavenly minded, find the meal revolting. It is a travesty of the blending of the basic ingredients of christian social action.

It is against the background of this confused spiritual and moral situation that I will highlight somewhat laboriously the current significance of non-racial organizations like the Christian Institute for black South Africa. It is fair to point out that, as far as I am aware, blacks have not formulated any crystallized attitude towards the Christian Institute as such, but it is rather to the so called non-racial organizations and spheres of participation that articulate blacks have formulated a 'foreign policy'.

You will appreciate the fact that for the sake of convenience I will generalise about black attitudes. By blacks here I will limit myself to those who are able to reflect about their situation. Every intellectual and spiritual movement has its philosophers and prophets in which the masses play the role of converted or potential disciples. The masses may not always be in a position to articulate the theoretical details of the spirit of the movement in which they participate, even as disciples.

Now, let us get back to our subject matter. What is the significance of the Christian Institute as a non-racial organization to black South Africa?

1. It Tries to Retrieve Discarded Values.

Like a hungry tramp who retrieves crumbs of food from garbage cans, the Christian Institute is seen to be trying to retrieve certain discarded christian values from the dirt bin of the South African way of life. I think this imagery is appropriate if you consider, on the one hand, the fact that the Christian Institute is an outcast in relation to the bulk of powerful white South Africa, and, on the other, that articulate

blacks pitifully doubt its chances of success. Some young blacks even consider the white man to be incorrigible.

At a recent meeting when I raised the question of the existence of whites who have been liberated by the Gospel, one black student pointed out to me that if you had ten snakes in a cage, it would be hazardous and ill-advised to try to distinguish between poisonous and harmless ones since you may not survive the process.

You should appreciate the fact that organizations like the Christian Institute do not enjoy the blessings of the large majority of the white community and that as a matter of fact the Christian Institute is currently being investigated for possible un-South African activities. Above any thing else, to black people this serves to cast doubts about the claims of potential white good will the Christian Institute has presupposed in its work of reconciliation. As a matter of fact all these conciliatory overtures of the Christian Institute are contradicted by the facts of daily life.

Are white people, in as far as they have reflected their beliefs and desires through the existing social and political institutions, really interested in meaningful fellowship with the black man? Is the Christian Institute not giving us a placebo of discarded spiritual values of the white community? blacks ask.

Examples of occasions when white people through their institutions have rejected moves for bringing about fellowship between black and white are daily with us.

Two months ago the Christian Institute organized a fellowship bus in which black and white members would ride in order to attend the Regional meeting in Dundee. As law abiding citizens we applied. But our application was turned down by the relevant authority. The lesson to be learnt from this is that fellowship between black and white is not a desirable thing; it is a discarded value.

N.G.K. Rejection of Black Man

Recently the General Synod of the N.G.K., according to reports, has rejected a motion which aimed at encouraging church councils to throw open church doors to all worshippers regardless of race or colour. The message of the Synod to the black man is clear: it is plain rejection of the black man as a normal fellow-worshipper of the white man. It is a formal act of rejection because it is unilateral and does not reciprocate the reality of the open doors of the black man's churches. No matter what theological and verbal gymnastics you may decide to play, the matter is clear; here is a case of an Assembly

of white Christians deciding against the normal and logical implementation of the principle of fellowship in the worship of God. They discard the logical unfolding of the principle. Of what use is the principle of fellowship if it cannot be implemented?

The same Synod is reported to have recommended that the provisions of the Immorality Act be extended to sex relations between two black people of different ethnic groups. The implications of this decision of the Synod are alarming, especially if one thinks of the new concept of 'nation' which forms the policy of Separate Development. In practice it will therefore mean that the provisions of the Immorality Act will be extended to individuals belonging to any two of the whole panoply of South African 'nations'. It will mean not only that an Indian will be prohibited from marrying a Coloured or African but also that a Zulu man will be prohibited from marrying a Xhosa or Sotho woman. Strangely enough the Synod did not find it logical that the Immorality Act should also be amended so as to prohibit sex relations between Afrikaners and English or German or French partners. Here I am not trying to suggest that the August Synod was being mischievous in its intentions and schemes about raising pure breeds from the ranks of each black 'nation.' Who knows? The tragedy of the 'homelands policy' may end up with a touch of the comedy of sex!

Comedy aside, this is a very serious matter. Here we see manifest the thought and spiritual projections not of some small-fry Anglican Church but of the largest of the D.R.C. churches, which serves as the spiritual mother of some of the most powerful men in the country, if not in the whole world—especially if you think of the power they wield over the individual when it comes to his freedom of speech, movement and association. In figurative language, these rights can be taken away, as it were at the drop of a hat. This is a church whose theological Commission has ingeniously unearthed biblical support for the present Government Apartheid policy. The story of the Tower of Babel features prominently as the basis for the theological motif of racial divisions.

The *Daily News* summed it up succinctly when it remarked: 'If these were the findings of an obscure Bible Belt sect, they might be amusing. But they emanate from the most powerful church shaping grass-roots opinion of the majority voting force in South Africa. For those of other persuasions there seems little left but to wonder and to pray (22nd October, 1974, p.14).'

Political Theology

Far from leaving me paralyzed into just wondering and praying, I become even more aware of the folly that has been circulating in Christian circles, that you can divorce the Gospel from politics. This statement is not designed to reflect negatively on the theological integrity of the Landman Commission Report. What I want to say is that here is a theological document drawn by responsible members of their respective church, which directly or indirectly lends support or establishes a theological basis for a contentious political theory of Separate Development. This is a clear example of a 'political theology.' By this I mean that the

N.G.K. theological fathers conducted their theological research in the context of the existing social and political realities. In other words they took seriously the questions posed by the political phenomenon of Separate Development as they searched, according to their lights, for the answer as well as for the implications of the Gospel to those social and political questions. I hope that I am not giving them more credit than they deserve.

The fact that I am not happy with the social and political implications of their theological findings is beside the point for the purposes of the principle I am trying to establish. The principle is that what is permissible for the N.G.K. to do should be permissible for other churches as well.

It should be clear to the N.G.K. as well as to those of its members who hold high political office that other theologians have also searched the Scriptures in good faith and come up with theological findings with different social and political implications. The case in point is *A Message to the People of South Africa*. One of its crucial paragraphs reads:

The Bible's teaching about creation has nothing to say about the distinctions between races and nations. God made man—the whole human race—in his image. God gave to man—the whole human race—dominion over the rest of creation. Where differences between people are used as badges or signs of opposing groups, this is due to human sin. Any scheme which is proposed for the rectifying of our disorders must take account of this essentially sinful element in the divisions between men and groups of men. Any scheme which is claimed to be Christian must also take account of the reconciliation already made for us in Christ. The policy of separate development does not take proper account of these truths. It promises peace and harmony between the peoples of our country not by a faithful and obedient pursuit of the reconciliation wrought by Christ, but through separation, which, being precisely the opposite course, is a demonstration of unbelief and distrust in the power of the Gospel. Any demonstration of the reality of reconciliation would endanger this policy; therefore the advocates of this policy inevitably find themselves opposed to the Church if it seeks to live according to the Gospel and if it shows that God's grace has overcome our hostilities. A thorough policy of racial separation must ultimately require that the Church should cease to be the Church.

From this it should be clear that basically whether one supports Separate Development or not depends in the last resort on how one reads and interprets the Bible. Wrong exegetical theology may lead to wrong politics in as far as politics deals with such basic questions as human dignity and social justice.

Before us we have two theologies: the theology of Separate Development endorsed by the Landman Commission and the theology of racial fellowship espoused by the *Message to the People of South Africa* and supported by many churches as well as groups like the Christian Institute.

Political stakes in these two opposing theologies have worked in favour of the Dutch Reformed Church simply because the political party in power has found this theology

contributory to its viability as a party. On the other hand those who have publicly advocated the theology of racial fellowship as amplified through concrete models in the SPROCAS literature, have in varying degrees become victims of Government action and, hence, religious persecution. I say that they were persecuted for their faith simply because the stand they took derived from a theological position opposite to that of the D.R.C. church. This leads me to another aspect of the significance of the Christian Institute for Black South Africa.

2. It Witnesses and Suffers

As co-sponsor of SPROCAS publications, the Christian Institute continued and developed the theology of the *Message to the People of South Africa* to its practical implication. Together with many churches, the Christian Institute sought the realization of concrete models which would serve as alternatives to the models of an Apartheid society. Since this was tantamount to stepping on the toes of political structures, the leadership of both the Christian Institute and SPROCAS was subjected to one form of suffering or another. In case any one was in doubt it was also here that one got a glimpse of how South Africa is fundamentally an unjust society.

Whereas the suffering of the white leaders at least included that they went through the motions of being charged, prosecuted and convicted, blacks were simply banned under the provisions of the Suppression of Communism Act. This is one of those South African imponderables that defy imagination.

Impact of a Redemptive Life

Sometimes when the ministry of words has lost its efficacy, prophets are called upon to communicate the saving message through the essence of their lives. You can shut your ears to words and distort their meaning no matter how great the truth they convey, but you can never escape the impact of a redemptive life: because it simply bangs on you. Redemptive life is power beyond words; it is the sum total of the impact of putting your life at stake for the welfare of others. This is what Christians from times immemorial have called the power of the cross. People have often asked, what happens after SPROCAS? My answer is, beyond the message of the theology of SPROCAS lies the theology of the power of the cross.

When you ask me, what is the significance of the Christian Institute to Black South Africa, my answer is, it is the power of the theology of the cross the Christian Institute is now living. Black people can understand this theology because they have always lived it, theology of power beyond words.

For many years now, when I meditate on how I should spend the rest of my life I have felt that I do not want to die like grass and die for nothing: I would like to die for something, for man. I have therefore often literally prayed that God may let my life be spent or get dissolved in the course of serving people. At times I trembled when I realised what I was praying for. Last year when I was banned I was confronted with the reality of what I had been praying for. I realized that my life was literally dissolving: for social purposes I would be no more. But at the same time I was full of the hope of

resurrection. I believed that God was going to reveal himself further. Didn't I get resurrected? When I was served with the banning order and after praying with the Security Police, I said, 'God is going to reveal himself.' If the cross is power beyond words, the hope of resurrection is power beyond power. It is in this context that I see the present significance of the Christian Institute.

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