

# Books & the Arts

## Canon Collins's Apologia

*John Grigg*

*Faith Under Fire* by Canon L. John Collins  
(Leslie Frewin, 40s)

WHEN THE PERFORMANCE of Christians in the 20th century is assessed by historians, the name of Canon John Collins will stand out among the few that are of real and lasting importance, while nearly all the ecclesiastics whose rank was more exalted in their day will have faded into oblivion.

Though his motto could be that of the Conservative Party in the recent British election — "Action, not Words" — he has now been prevailed upon to write an account of his ministry. And very interesting it is. He writes with lucidity and verve, and his story throws much light upon the Christian religion, upon contemporary politics, and upon his own character.

Having known him fairly well for a number of years, and co-operated in some of his activities, I have thought of him as a youngish man, or at any rate a middle-aged man of roughly my own vintage. If I had paused to reflect I would have known better, and in fact I remember being rather surprised when he once mentioned that Mervyn Stockwood, Bishop of Southwark, had been his pupil at Cambridge. But it came as a shock when I read that he was ordained in 1928 (when I was only four). Such is his vitality, and so free is he from any of the affectations of seniority, that it is hard to believe he is in his sixties and has been a clergyman for nearly forty years. Age is, indeed, a most unreliable criterion of intellectual, even of physical, vigour, and John Collins makes nonsense of the fashionable cult of youth.

As an ordinand he showed promise of a brilliant, conventional career, but before long he was deviating from the strait path that leads to preferment. By 1939 he was a Christian Socialist, holding — as he still holds — that a society based on the profit motive could not be a Christian society; and after the explosion of the atom bombs in 1945 his already mounting horror at the

excesses of modern war turned to a state of near-pacifism (though he has never become an out-and-out pacifist).

As a wartime chaplain in the RAF he came into conflict with authority, but also discovered himself and acquired a technique of ministrations which he has since applied in wider contexts. The key to his approach is that Christian witness should spread outwards from a small cell of dedicated crusaders, and that it should take in the whole of life — i.e. the problems of society as well as the problems of the individual. In his view, the Church should "stay out of politics" only in the sense that it should not form a Church party; in every other sense he believes that the Church should be deeply involved in politics.

While heartily agreeing with him on that general point, I have not always been able to share his specific political judgments. For instance, I think he has been fundamentally mistaken on the subject of nuclear weapons (which, I would argue, are the safest, not the most dangerous, that the human race has developed, because they are the least likely to be used). And I also fail to understand how he can reconcile his belief in State Socialism (not at all what F. D. Maurice, the founder of Christian Socialism, had in mind) with his antipathy to coercion. But on many other matters, and particularly on race relations, I find his political attitude wholly congenial.

HE COMBINES QUALITIES which are very rarely seen together — the probing intellect of a don, the idealism of an early Christian, and the organising ability of a top business executive. His biggest practical achievement so far has been Christian Action, which he launched at Oxford at the end of 1946 and which, since he became a Canon of St. Paul's in early 1949, has been run from the basement of his house in Amen Court. This interdenominational "cell" has been active in many different directions, its most famous work being to raise money for the victims of oppression in Southern Africa. Today, the Christian Action Defence and Aid Fund is banned by the South African Government, but is recognised by the UN and has received contributions from many governments (though not yet, alas, from the British Government) as well as countless individuals.

John Collins has made enemies, both among worldly people who resent his idealism, and among idealists who resent his worldly wisdom. A man of his ability is expected to be either a powerful layman, or a Prince of the Church working in close accord with the established secular powers. His peculiarity — and his glory — is that he has devoted his talents to the service of Truth and Right, as he is given to see them, in disregard of his own career. But his insights, original as they are, are not exactly revolutionary. The supreme merit of his thinking, which emerges quite clearly in the book, is that it respects and retains much that is best in the traditions of orthodox Christianity.

## Outlines

*Margaret Roberts*

*African Trade Unions* by Ioan Davies (Penguin African Library, 5s)

*The Economics of Underdeveloped Countries* by Jagdish Bhagwati (World University Library, 12s 6d)

*African Outline* by Margery Perham (O.U.F., 6s 6d)

*Christ and the New Nations* by Martin Jarrett-Kerr (S.P.C.K., 6s 6d)

*African Triumph* by Jane G. Walters (George Allen & Unwin, 5s)

IF THERE IS ONE QUALITY which more than any other makes a good political writer, it is the ability to generalise successfully — to draw convincing conclusions on the basis of quoted evidence. Of these five authors, Martin Jarrett-Kerr is most impressive in this respect; his book is, perhaps surprisingly, the most readable of the five, because his case is carefully built up on the basis of his own and others' experience. It is a plea for "the imagination to feel with the outstretched hand of the (non-Western) recipients of aid what the gifts we give them really weigh".

In a sense, this is the point of all these books. Ioan Davies has read widely and clearly knows a great deal about African trade unions; but his book leaves the impression that his very obtrusive opinions were formed before the evidence was collected. Too many of his conclusions are unsupported by evidence other than his own hypotheses. Obviously he cannot be blamed, for example, for the fact that his book went to press before the Ghana coup. But since he appears to have relied for most of his information about the Ghana trade unions on the opinions of its TUC General Secretary, John Tettegah — who, following the coup, denounced the former government's treatment of the unions — it is hardly surprising that his remarks on Ghana are often quite unconvincing. He is much too keen on glib categories: Nigerian unionism shows "massive apathy", whereas this condition has been "formally abolished" in Ghana. While it may be objected that such briefly stated examples are quoted out of context, they do indicate a doctrinaire espousal, regardless of the evidence, of the stated objectives of the most rigid one party states in Africa.

Similarly, Mr. Davies falls into the old error, common to the far left and the far right, that Africa's problems are entirely the creation of foreign cold warriors — in Mr. Davies's case the villain being American imperialism through the ICFTU — and that Africans are incapable of making their own successes and failures. One of his own conclusions makes the point, perhaps unconsciously: "there is just a chance that, if left to themselves, Africans will be able to develop the kind of unions that suit their

particular stages of development". (My italics.) This would seem to indicate precious little confidence in an Africa left to itself. In an introduction, the series' Editor, Mr. Segal neatly expresses the current dilemma for African unionism — an indigenous dilemma which is remarkably little illuminated by Mr. Davies, perhaps because he is so busy looking for non-African scapegoats.

PROFESSOR BHAGWATI, BY CONTRAST, has written an extremely solid reference manual on the causes and effects of poverty in the developing world, the role of international trade and aid in fighting it, and some of the political considerations which affect economic relations between the rich and the poor countries. It contains very little that is new or remarkable, and virtually no opinions. Yet he skirts none of the issues of international controversy, such as the attachment of "strings" to aid, the relative efficiency of authoritarianism and democracy in raising the standard of living, and the Marxist approach to

interest rates. The chief value of the book lies in its simplification of economists' language — which he uses but clearly explains — and in bringing together all the factors necessary to an appraisal of the massive question of development. But in view of the care which has gone into the preparation of the volume, it is astonishing that most of the statistics used relate to the 1950's, so that many of the excellent figures and tables given are nearly ten years out of date.

DAME MARGERY PERHAM'S *African Outline* is based upon a series of BBC Third Programme talks. It is very disappointing. She seems to be groping towards an explanation of African "racialism" — perhaps because she feels a current European "disillusionment" with Africa. But it is not convincing. On the one hand, she underrates the sense of African solidarity inherent in the struggle against the southern white regimes: leaders like Dr. Julius Nyerere do not, as she implies, adopt militant postures simply in order to preserve their authority with the

masses; they are as genuinely committed as any. On the other hand, by suggesting that racialism provides the cement of national and Pan-African unity, because of the failure of African nationalism to do the job, she adduces a more cynical and sinister motive which does not exist. It is hard to escape the conclusion that she does not understand the phenomenon she tries to describe. She appears herself to be a victim of the current mood of disillusionment with Africa's course; and much of her book is a strongly implied rebuke to Africa to get into perspective the history of colonialism and racialism to which it is now in a state of reaction. The result is a sometimes rather plaintive muddle.

JANE WALTERS HAS WRITTEN a series of ten sketches of Africans, mainly American Africans, who have made a contribution to the dignity and advance of their race. Many were born in slavery, one recalls the horror of capture in Africa as a boy of eleven. The style is child-like, fairly charming and moralistic. ●

## Removing Misconceptions

*Raymond Kunene*

*African Outline* by Paul Bohannan (Penguin African Library)

NO CONTINENT has so fully absorbed world interest in recent years as Africa. Not only because of the political changes of the independence era, but also because of the large quantity of unknown facts that have been unearthed. Interestingly enough the very Europe that a few years ago saw Africa as a land of savages and wild animals is now frantically producing data to refute its own previous assumptions. But as Paul Bohannan observes there are still deep cultural prejudices in the European population in spite of the vast change in scientific data about Africa and Africans.

Paul Bohannan claims that the "African culture shares more of its traits, its history, its social organisation with Europe than Asia shares with Europe. . . ." This is a highly subjective point of view. For one thing the social organisation in Asia and Africa are more akin. In the latter continent social organisation is traditionally of a communal character with weaker feudal traditions whereas in Asia the feudal organisation was or is much more deeply entrenched. In Europe on the other hand a communal organisation and consequently communal ethic has never been the primary form of social organisation. Even creeds like Christianity and socialism which initially constituted the core of the communal ethic have been turned into bureaucratic dogmas.

So Europe lacking any communal experience goes rushing to theoretical solutions propounded by individual social scientists. No wonder the psychiatrist (equivalent to the diviner) has assumed such importance. No wonder hospitals are crowded with individuals who with a bit of communal contact would have survived the shock of isolation. But Europe still lies to itself and believes that all this is inherent in the nature of industrialism and therefore has in it a superior

value. Confusion worse confounded: the individuals become units with no social obligations to each other; the old are discarded in old age homes to spend their last years in the isolation of open "prisons," the orphaned and "illegitimate" are thrown away into orphanages as outcasts who are grudgingly maintained by non-governmental institutions.

All this is relevant in a discussion of Mr. Bohannan's book. For in his discussion of the cultural aspects of African life it gradually becomes clear that not only must Europe correct its prejudices but it must seek out scientists steeped in the tradition of African social solutions. Indeed Africa must send social missionaries to the young but technologically advanced Europe.

Mr. Bohannan faces a dilemma; for while he sees the need to demolish many misconceptions about Africa (and does so successfully), he cannot accept in himself the great havoc caused by colonialism. This is of course the limitation of the culturist approach to Africa. Mr. Bohannan states: "The essence of colonialism is that there are always two, often opposed, ways of looking at the power system . . . : one is of the colonising power and the other represents the views of the colonised peoples. The two viewpoints grow naturally and silently out of different *cultural* (my italics) viewpoints and goals." This is surely a shoddy way of looking at the problem of colonial occupation. Even if the two peoples were of the same cultural tradition the conflict would be inevitable as indeed was the case between the English and the Irish.

Developing his thesis to ridiculous extremes, the author states in the same chapter: "In an African colony, then, the political and economic situation was assessed by the European rulers in terms of European culture." It is regrettable that Mr. Bohannan fails to give a deeper scientific evaluation of the Mau-Mau. For surely the Mau-Mau was a movement based on a real grievance — the land. The fact that religious symbols, animal sacrifices, became the core of the movement illustrates clearly how highly superstitious people become when they have to risk their lives. Examples abound in the world of similar practices celebrated according to different traditions.

Mr. Bohannan claims that since the number of the people who can be considered characteristically negroid is so small, the negro population must have increased in only "a few thousand years from an extremely small original population." One might contend that there are three types of

continents; major, mid and minor. In the major continents — Africa, early America, Australia, Asia's Soviet area — there is a sparsity of population precisely because birth rate falls wherever a population's mobility is spread over a vast area. In the mid-continents — India, China — the area of expansion though vast does not allow for an almost limitless expansion. Therefore settlements accumulate within the given area resulting in big populations. In the minor-continent of Europe the space is so limited that populations quickly accumulate giving a density far in excess of the size of the areas. This in itself produces a competitiveness for occupiable land and other natural resources which bring about a high sense of property possession, etc. The fact that we can substitute Negro for American Indians and still maintain Mr. Bohannan's theses about the relative size and age of the American Indian population in itself makes us question the validity of the theory.

The book is at its weakest when it deals with African religion. The author concentrates on the magical-ritualistic aspects of the African religion and confuses ritualistic variations in each "tribe" with what constitutes religion. African religion is a philosophical justification of the communal form of organisation. The ancestors are ceremoniously reunited with the living so that the integrity of the community is maintained and sanctified. All else becomes symbolic of communal ethic; even the so-called godlings would be found to be symbolic figures of the past. The very Pyramids of Egypt are an elaborate restatement of the continuity of life with all its earthly qualities. In this sense the Greek gods were also elevated individuals who had displayed qualities the early communities considered praiseworthy. No wonder that the Europeans are baffled by the secularism in African religion. The individual is responsible to the community and his virtues and vices are decided on their positive or negative influence on society. Sin, therefore, is not as in the mystical Christian systems against a supernatural being, but against society. This alone explains what apparently baffles Mr. Bohannan and others — the absence of dogma. From practical experience the African traditional religion vindicated life and relegated to the background elaborate mystical speculation about life after death.

With the modifications suggested, the book would do well as a text-book for schools to eliminate various misconceptions about Africa. ●