

CHURCHES IN CAPTIVITY

J. R. Cochrane, **SERVANTS OF POWER — The Role of English-Speaking Churches in South Africa: 1903–1930.** Towards a Critical Theology via an Historical Analysis of the Anglican and Methodist Churches. Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987, 278 pp. Price: R28,00

Servants of Power is of undoubted value to the critical historian of South African Church history. It is, as the blurb describes it, the “first serious revisionist account” of South African Church history and is of great value therefore to the scholar, the student and the serious thinker. There is, of course, a lamentable lack of published material on the South African Church and what there is suffers from manifold problems of perspective and presupposition. So Dr Cochrane’s new book is a welcome attempt at correcting this deficiency and providing an alternative way of analysing the history of the “English-speaking churches” and their relation to the temporal power in South Africa.

Cochrane’s book is one which takes very seriously the economic, social and political stage on which the so-called English-speaking churches operate and in so doing provides us with a fairly complete picture of a church bound hand and foot to the very structures it sought (every now and then) to criticise. The churches, according to Cochrane, were “dependent on those same powers which produced the problems which concerned them. They were dependent not only in a material sense . . . but also on the ideological plane as well . . .” [p. 114]. The way in which the church attempted to deal with such issues (for example) as the extension of Pass Laws to women and children; hardships on farms and house raids by police; advances made to blacks in reserve areas by mining agents thereby forcing them into wage labour; exploitative wages; ill treatment and inadequate representation in courts of law, was by resolutions directed at the government asking the authorities to debate or rescind certain pieces of legislation or to provide relief. “[The churches **felt** the anguish and resistance of the indigenous people but [were not] . . . able to speak and act in solidarity with them.” [P. 112].

Cochrane piles up evidence upon evidence of the fundamental lack of understanding and analysis on the part of the churches in the arena of economic realities and thus shows us how completely moribund they were in effectively countering the growing exploitation on the part of the ruling power. In Cochrane’s assessment, “. . . the years up until 1912 show little evidence of any critical analysis by the Church of the structures of expropriation and exploitation . . .” [p.102]. And this, while at the same time the churches “contained the largest black, colonial membership of any institution under the direct control of the colonists” [p.55]. The churches, “grievously limited by their essentially British perspective” failed to support the

masses when any form of real resistance occurred because such resistance posed a threat to the economy “upon which they fed” [p. 89]. It is this, according to Cochrane, which provides the solution “to the apparent contradiction between a Church championing the oppressed while expressing deep antipathy towards any immediate resistance on their part.” [**ibid.**]

After 1920 there is more evidence of social analysis, but “. . . the Church battled with itself . . . as it sought to discover what its social function was” [p. 129]. While the church in the early 1920’s may have produced a “flurry of critical moments and ideas”, these did not “prove strong enough to shake the foundations of the Church’s functional dependency on the ruling class” [p. 132]. Although there were, on occasion, some fairly radical demands, “no specific analysis, no particular programme, no unambiguous policy, and no theological clarification seems to have been carried out” [p. 133]. The Church, towards the end of the decade displayed “a growing interest in apolitical spirituality accompanied by demands that the Church spend its energies on specifically religious tasks” [p. 144].

The second part of the book is (thankfully) more readable than the first, whose slow procession of one fairly dull historical fact after another leaves one looking longingly at one’s shelves for an Agatha Christie to relieve the literary indigestion. And this is a pity because the second part of the book gives a valuable explanation as to why the author has chosen the method he has. It is here that Cochrane makes a very telling statement:

“If we take the analysis of the Church’s captivity to the dominant structure of the political economy seriously, and if we recognise that characteristic marks of this structure are domination and dependence, exploitation and poverty, then it must be faced that that conflict lies not essentially between Church and state in South Africa, but within the Church.” [p. 222f.]

This, it seems to me, is saying something very profound and certainly something which needs to be heard. The problem is that I can’t imagine any but the most dedicated reader reaching page 222! Dr Cochrane has taken a particularly appetising walnut (the placing of the South African Church in the warp and weft of economic realities) and crushed it with an extremely heavy book, and the reader is left with a rather unpleasing mix of shell and sand to pick over. □