

APARTHEID & THE REFORMED CHURCHES

by ALAN PATON

Nothing could be more justly deserved than the suspension of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches meeting in Ottawa. For thirty-four years these churches have stood wholeheartedly behind the Nationalist Government in its policies of Apartheid and racial separation. What is more, they have claimed scriptural justification for these policies, and have said in effect that God approves them.

The arguments are fatuous. It is said that God created the separate races, and therefore He must approve any policies that keep them separate. His greatest gift to a human being is not his or her humanity but his or her membership of a nation. Christ's teaching that we are all one is to be taken not in a liberal or sentimental but in a spiritual and figurative and symbolical sense. This intellectual nonsense was preached by the Nationalist Afrikaner prophets, by the late Dr. Diederichs, and by Dr. Meyer of ex-SABC fame, and in the political arena by the late Dr. H.F. Verwoerd. Alas, it deceived an overwhelming majority of the Afrikaner nation, and worse still it deceived a majority of Afrikaner churchmen. Nor can one conceal the truth that many of them wanted to be deceived.

The ideal was so lofty, the goal so tremendous, the vision so ineffable, that it was justifiable in pursuing them to inflict great suffering on one's fellow human beings. One witnessed the terrible spectacle of the majority of Afrikaner Christians consenting to the infliction of injury and suffering on their fellow countrymen, many of whom were also Christians. How black Christianity has survived this revelation of the immoral nature of this kind of white Christianity is nothing less than a miracle.

The Group Areas Act took away people's property, almost invariably the property of Indian and Coloured people, and offered them inadequate compensation. It threw established businessmen out of the towns, and compelled them to trade in remote and segregated areas. Hundreds of thousands of African small farmers and gardeners were thrown out of the "black spots" and moved into new townships where farming and gardening were impossible, where, in fact, any real contact with soil and grass and crop and beast was denied them. Any mention of such deprivation was regarded as liberal sentimentality by our rulers. Were they not building a new heaven and a new earth, yet critics and agitators spoke of such trivialities as soil and grass and crop and beast? I have seen grown men and women weep to lose them.

So a great wound was inflicted on the soul of Afrikanerdom. Tens of thousands of Afrikaners were seduced from the faith of their fathers. They in fact had taken a new God, and this was nothing less than themselves, the nation. But being human they tried to reconcile their nationalism. So was invented the monstrosity called

Christian-Nationalism, and this was preached to them by their prophets. And because of this they have now been rejected by their fellow Reformed Christians throughout the world. More than that, they have been rejected by some of their fellow Reformed Christians in South Africa itself, the members of the so-called "daughter churches". The daughters have now come very close to rejecting the mother, and no wonder, for it was the mother who threw them out of the house.

The morality of the NGK and the NHK has now been rejected by the world's Reformed Churches. Yet it is not the morality alone that has been rejected, but also the religion itself, which has been adjudged in Ottawa to be a heresy. As was to be expected, the NHK has rejected the judgement defiantly, the NGK much less so. The NHK is not in the true sense of the word, a church at all. It is an organisation of stiff-necked and unloving people. They have long since said goodbye to religion and morality; their white exclusivity matters more to them than either their religion or their morality. But they too because of human necessity have identified their exclusivity with their religion. That is the way God wants them to be.

To the rest of the world this identification is grotesque and blasphemous. Do the members of the NHK believe in it themselves? There can be no doubt that some of them do. They have eyes and cannot see, ears and cannot hear. Are there members of the NGK who in their hearts do not believe in it, and yet cannot break out of the prison that they have built for themselves out of the hardness of the hearts? I have no doubt that there are such. If I were a better Christian, I would pity them. But I find it hard to pity men and women who are harsh and cruel to their fellows, in the name of a God who is said to be love.

Is there any hope in the NGK? I don't know. There are hopeful signs. Some 150 of the dominees have now rejected racial separation. But they have taken a long time. That the NGK holds a position of great influence in the lives of our rulers, I have no doubt, but it is an influence that has hardly ever been used. Is the NGK going to use it now? I don't know. If the NGK came to its senses as Saul did on the Damascus road, there might still be hope for our country. "Twould ring the bells of Heaven the wildest peal of years".

I have cherished this hope, and to some extent I still do. But I know also that hope deferred too long can bring about the destruction of the land that for me and for many is the beloved country. Therefore Christians awake, and especially you, the members of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. Or are you waiting for Death himself to awaken you from sleep? □