

White Christianity

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by Malcolm Magee, O.P.

The Dominicans of the English province have now been working in South Africa for over forty years and the work we are doing is varied and colourful. At Stellenbosch in the Cape we have a priory which is primarily a training house for (white) South Africans with a novitiate for both choir and laybrothers and a study house of philosophy and theology. At Hammanskraal in the northern Transvaal we staff (with the help of the Dutch Dominicans) a major seminary for the training of African priests. We have two university chaplaincies, Stellenbosch and Cape Town, and are responsible for the running of nine parishes, white, brown and black, one at Stellenbosch, the others on the East Rand. I would like in this article to give you some idea of the conditions in one of these parishes and show how they reflect the racial situation in the country as a whole. These observations are based on the experience of five years working on the parishes in South Africa, mostly among the Africans in Boksburg location.

Boksburg, lying about fifteen miles east of Johannesburg, is a fairly typical reef mining town, centring on one of the biggest gold mines in the country. It has a white population of about 25,000 and until the beginning of last year the African location, Stirtonville (population c. 40,000) stood about two miles outside the town, and the old school buildings we possessed served as a church for the 3,000 or so Catholics in the location and a primary school for their children. Then, under the provisions of the Group Areas Act, Stirtonville was proclaimed a Coloured area¹, the Africans were uprooted and deported to a new location fifteen miles outside the town and the Coloured population from all over the East Rand is at present being moved into Stirtonville. So we now have three parishes in Boksburg: a white one, St Dominic's; a brown one, St Francis of Assisi; and a black one, St Albert the Great.

The new location the Africans were moved to is typical of the modern apartheid townships. Ethnic grouping is enforced, another simple example of the Nationalist 'divide and rule' policy. In the older locations the main African tribal groups, Zulu, Basuto, Bapedi, Tswana, lived together, attended the same schools, the same

¹The Coloureds are a separate ethnic group of mixed white and African blood. There are about two million of them in the Republic, three million whites and eleven million Africans.

churches, shared the same social amenities and generally formed the same community. In the new locations there are different sections or zones for the different groups with separate amenities, separate schools and a general discouragement of communal mixing. Here we had two main sections, one for the Zulu and one for the Basuto; we were granted two church sites, one in each section, and when I mentioned to the Director of Bantu Affairs (the white official responsible for handling African affairs in the area) that we would only be building on one he expressed considerable surprise: 'Surely the ideal is to have one church for the Zulus and one for the Basuto'. It isn't difficult to see how this policy encourages factions, tribal rivalries, petty jealousies and suspicion which can erupt into bloody battles and confirm the whites in their dangerous but dearly-loved illusion that the Africans are still uncivilised savages. No attempt had been made to create any variety in the housing in the new township. When the Africans left their homes in Stirtonville they moved into a new ghetto with row upon depressing row of identical box-like huts dotted like mushrooms in soul-destroying monotony over the bare veldt. The houses had no doors (except an outside door), no ceilings and no floors. There was no lighting in the location, no police and no social amenities whatever, consequently the crime rate soared and people were afraid to move out of their homes after dark. They had to travel fifteen miles in overcrowded buses to their jobs in Boksburg, which meant an extra £2 a month on bus fares from their already meagre wages.

And yet this upheaval made hardly any impact at all on the white population of Boksburg, including the white parishioners of St Dominic's; in fact most of them were completely unaware of it until the impertinent house 'girl' or garden 'boy' asked for an increase in wages to meet the high bus fares. And this is the real tragedy of the church in South Africa, the almost invincible ignorance of white christians regarding the living conditions of the Africans and the fact that practically nothing is being done to counter that ignorance. Most of the South African whites are unable to see the African as a human person at all or to sympathise with his suffering and his struggle to attain basic human rights and dignity, a struggle against the countless humiliations and degradations he encounters every day in his contact with whites, against the violence, frustration and despair of location life. For them the 'native' is part of a large, threatening amorphous mass, a fearful 'problem' which is better thrust into the unconscious or left to be dealt with by the politicians. I say South African whites rather than white South Africans (descendants of the British and Dutch settlers) for the genuine South African, if there is such a thing, at least has an attitude towards the African even if it is one of infuriating benevolence and paternalism. But the thousands of white immigrants who pour into the country every month from all over democratic and christian Europe are not

interested in acquiring an attitude. The majority of them are attracted to the country by the sunshine, the money and the privilege, and this seems to me to be the essential *immorality* of emigration to a country like South Africa. The majority of the indigenous population, the people to whom the country belongs, live in poverty and under privilege and can only watch in embittered silence while the country is invaded by hordes of foreigners who take over all the best jobs, who are immediately entrenched in privilege by the apartheid laws, and enjoy a standard of living second only to that in North America; foreigners who are only too willing to carry on the traditions of suppression and exploitation and help to bolster up a racialist and immoral regime which will go to any lengths to attract white immigrants.

The average white South African derives his knowledge of the African from his domestic servant or garden boy, for he has no contact at all with the thousands of intelligent, educated Africans. This is partly due to the rigid enforcement of the laws regarding 'petty' apartheid which make social mixing and personal contact almost impossible. The Nationalists obviously realise that once black and white begin to accept each other as human beings the whole rotten structure of apartheid will begin to crumble. And yet it seems to me there are still many ways in which this social contact could be effected within the framework of parish life, by the integration of worship, sodalities, committees, groups, etc. But this would require a great deal of courage and initiative on the part of the parish priests in charge of the white parishes, and most of them are content to impose a superficial layer of parochial or sodality Christianity on their congregations without any regard to the explosive social and political context in which they are living; to hide from the urgent Christian issues by dissipating their energies on more fashionable ecumenical and liturgical activities. To do otherwise would be to court fierce opposition and unpopularity and to lose many of their white parishioners, which they are unprepared to do. Perhaps a personal reminiscence here might illustrate a fairly common attitude. I remember shortly after arriving in South Africa, doing a regular supply at an outstation in one of our parishes. We celebrated mass in a little village hall and the congregation consisted of about 30 coloureds and a dozen or so whites. For various reasons it looked as if we were going to lose the use of the hall and I asked at mass if any members of the congregation could supply alternative accommodation, fully expecting one of the whites to offer the use of a barn or hut. There was no response from this quarter but one of the coloured parishioners said she would be only too glad to let us have the use of her living room which was big enough to hold us all. I duly reported this to the parish priest who sadly informed me that this would never do since the whites simply wouldn't come to mass. I asked him if it was really true that the whites would rather commit mortal sin

than enter the house of a coloured, and if so, did he think we should fall in line with this kind of perverted morality, and I met with the even sadder response that I didn't really understand the situation and the traditional South African way of life, an accusation which was to become boringly familiar as the years went on.

But there is certainly no doubt that apartheid is firmly rooted in the church; that most white christians including a large number of the clergy support government policy, a few of them openly, the majority tacitly by their indifference, selfishness and greed. There is no doubt also that many of them would leave the churches if any attempt were made to re-educate them or to integrate parish activities; but it seems to me we must be prepared to accept this and even to escort them cheerfully from the premises since they have obviously closed their ears to the message of the gospel. As it is, thousands of Africans are turning away from the faith in disgust because they regard our mouthings of christian charity and brotherhood as so much hypocritical cant, which indeed they are. Already the church is in danger of losing a whole generation of young Africans. The best of them lack all conviction³ and there are many other creeds to claim their allegiance; communism, despite the fact that it is working underground (or perhaps because of it) exercises a powerful influence because it provides a plausible form of salvation history and shows a genuine concern for social justice as is evident from the courage and conviction of a man like Abram Fischer; Islam is gaining ground because it is non-racial in practice as well as in theory. And the only way we can reverse this process is by a systematic attack on the moral turpitude of white christianity.

We were duly granted a site in the new Boksburg location and proceeded to build a church. The site was rented to us by the town council on a yearly lease and when the deed of lease came through (after the church was built) it contained the following clause:

'When, in the opinion of the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, the lessee uses the site or allows or suffers it to be used for purposes other than those for which it was let, or where the activities of the lessee or any of his or her representatives, whether on the site or elsewhere, are such as to encourage or tend to encourage deterioration in the relationship between Bantu and the Government or governmental persons or bodies of the lessor, or are aimed at defiance or breaches of the law, the lessor shall, notwithstanding the provisions of clause 1 hereof, give the lessee notice in writing that this deed of lease shall, at the expiration of 12 months calculated as from the date of such notice be deemed to be cancelled.'

³For typical examples of the thinking African's attitude to christianity see the relevant pages of Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* and Ezechiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*.

Now it isn't difficult to see that this little piece of legal blackmail, if submitted to, puts the church in the power of the government. If the Minister (an Afrikaner Nationalist committed to the enforcement of apartheid) objects to anything said or done in the church he can close it down. If the priest were to give a course to the ycw, on the social encyclicals, say, or *Pacem In Terris*, or if he were to read to the congregation any of the four anti-apartheid pastorals issued by the South African hierarchy this could certainly be interpreted as tending to encourage 'deterioration in the relationship between Bantu and the Government' and he would run a great risk of losing the church. He is therefore committed to preaching a truncated and emasculated gospel which isn't the gospel at all but a special brew of diluted christianity approved by the Nationalists and judged to be suitable for African consumption. The trouble is that the church in South Africa generally does submit to this kind of blackmail. We did in this instance and have done so many times in the past, abandoning position after position like an army in retreat while the Africans cynically watched our antics of shiftiness and compromise. In the above situation there seemed to me to be only one possible course of action (though my superiors did not agree) but sometimes the issue is not so clear, as when the Bantu Education Act, the brainchild of Verwoerd, came into force in 1954. The express purpose of this act was to establish a separate, inferior kind of education for the Africans (till then they had generally received the same education as Europeans), a conditioning in servitude as permanent sub-citizens in their own country.³ Hundreds of thousands of African children are being submitted to this kind of brainwashing every year, and the problem that presented itself to the private schools (including the catholic schools) was whether to accept this monstrosity or to close down in protest. Whereas the Anglican schools in the diocese of Johannesburg decided to close down we opted to keep going on the principle that a bad education (provided it was catholic) was better than no education at all. Nearly all the responsible Africans I've discussed this with, including teachers, are convinced that we were wrong, that it was a betrayal, and that the church should have made a united and uncompromising stand against the government.

Should we attempt to come to some kind of compromise with apartheid or should we fight it openly and run the risk of losing our schools, churches and the real, if limited, freedom we have of administering the sacraments and teaching catechism to the African people? This dilemma is continually presenting itself to the church in South Africa, and more immediately, to the priest working among the Africans and coming into almost daily contact with government and municipal officials. Shall I keep my mouth shut and go along with this fellow or shall I tell him what I really think and risk the

³An account of the cruel and savage effects of Bantu education is given by Chief Luthuli in *Let My People Go* (Fontana books), pp. 44-49.

consequences? The strain can be crippling, depending on one's temperament. I have heard it powerfully argued by one or two priests that the 'missioner' in South Africa should behave as if he were working, say, in one of the countries behind the iron curtain and content himself with performing his essential duties quietly and unobtrusively; and if we have faith, perseverance and trust in God then gradually the gospel will act as a leaven and transform the social and political scene. There is no doubt that many dedicated missionaries are doing this today and it is due to their efforts and the lonely heroism of the missionaries in the past that the church is as firmly rooted as she is among the African people. But the argument seems to me to be wrong for two reasons. First, because the situation of the church in South Africa is not the same as it is in communist countries. It is much more like the situation as it was in Nazi Germany at the beginning of the war, or as it was in England when industrial capitalism was at the height of its power. And in both these instances the church was guilty of betrayal through silence and compromise, a betrayal from which we haven't yet recovered. And second, because an essential part of the church's mission is to bear witness, to preach the gospel fearlessly regardless of consequences, to give testimony of the truth even if it means crucifixion. The church still exercises a great deal of power and influence in South Africa and if we made a determined and united stand the effects would be incalculable.

But this hardly seems likely at present. Since the Nationalist government came to power in 1948 the hierarchy in South Africa have issued four anti-apartheid pastorals. The last one, issued at the beginning of 1962 stated:

'As Christian people we dare not remain silent and passive in face of the injustices inflicted on members of the underprivileged racial groups. Colour must never be permitted to offer an excuse or a pretext for injustice. We must use every lawful means suggested by our Christian conscience in order to counteract and overcome the injustices pressing down on underprivileged groups through the toleration of a starvation level of wages, of job-reservation, of the evils which flow from compulsory migratory labour, particularly when the people who belong to these groups are denied the elementary right to organise in defence of their legitimate interests.'

But since then the hierarchy have dared to remain silent for four years although the apartheid laws have become increasingly inhuman and ruthless. The pastorals were read once at all the masses on the prescribed Sundays and then for the most part conveniently forgotten. There is no guidance, no leadership and no unanimity of policy, even among the hierarchy. Now and again one hears a lonely courageous voice crying in the wilderness but it is soon swallowed up in the silence of a general indifference. When David Craig-

head, a prominent Cape catholic and member of the Liberal party, was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act last year hardly a ripple disturbed the surface of catholic apathy. The *Southern Cross*, the most widely read (among whites) catholic weekly newspaper, keeps its nose out of trouble and sticks to the factual reporting of parochial news. We mustn't meddle in politics. Verwoerd's fatuous remarks last year about the dangers of 'social christianity' and his admonition to ministers of religion to confine themselves to 'godliness' are reflected in the policy, generally accepted by the majority of christians to keep out of politics and confine ourselves to the 'spiritual sphere', wherever that may be. It's time we realised that Afrikaner nationalism isn't a political creed in any ordinary sense but a racist ideology like Naziism which strikes at the heart of every human relationship, personal, communal and religious. It's time we realised and taught our people, particularly the whites, that we are in conscience bound to oppose by every means in our power the blasphemous apartheid laws which are destroying African christianity. And this teaching will have to be done from the pulpit and in the white schools, because the sad fact is that most white South Africans (in our parishes, at any rate) do very little reading and derive most of their knowledge of the country's affairs from the crude, heavy-handed propaganda of SABC. Nor is there any point in our reiterating vague generalities about social justice or the morality of unjust law; they have heard these things often enough. It is the Pass laws, Job Reservation, Influx Control, Bantu Education, the No Trial laws and the whole complex of repressive legislation, these particular laws, which have to be opposed and it is obvious that this opposition can only be effective through some kind of political activity. In South Africa of all places there can be no separation between christianity and politics.

Time is running short. If anything is to be achieved by non-violent means it can only be done by the whites. And this means personal political involvement. Every avenue of peaceful political expression and protest has been closed to the Africans, Coloureds and Indians. Thousands of them are eating their hearts out in prison, are exiled, banned or under house arrest for no other crime than that they have tried to secure ordinary human rights and dignity for themselves and their people. Meanwhile white christianity averts its eyes and crosses to the other side of the road. Pius XI said the tragedy of the church in the nineteenth century was that she lost the working classes; the tragedy of the church in the twentieth century, in South Africa at least, might well be that she loses the non-white peoples. But perhaps it is already too late.

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