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CHURCH AND STATE.

IN APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

By The Reverend Frank Chikane

Ambrose Reeves, Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg in the 1950s, was deported from the country after the Sharpeville massacre, the reality of which he was working to expose. In Britain, he was President of the Anti-Apartheid Movement from 1970 until his death in 1981. The first Ambrose Reeves Lecture in his memory was delivered in London on April 22nd, by the Rev Frank Chikane, Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. . Frank Chikane

Bishop Ambrose Reeves is known for his opposition to various apartheid measures of the 1950s. especially Bantu Education. He led the appeal for the treason trialists of the 1950s. resulting in the formation of the Treason Trial Defence Fund which laid the foundation for the Defence and Aid Fund. He was instrumental in arranging the agreement that ended the Alexandra bus boycott of 1957. But the most outstanding of his contributions in South Africa against the racist and violent system of apartheid was his effort to expose the truth about the cruel Sharpeville shootings. He left South Africa for six months to give world-wide publicity about it. and then got back only to be deported for his witness and protest against the evils of the apartheid system.

' I would like to submit that Bishop Ambrose Reeves is part of a long tradition of church struggle in South Africa to witness and protest against the evils of the apartheid system, however peripheral or marginal this can be. Within this tradition we think of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston who believed that the function of a priest was not to be silent in the face of injustices. He exposed and opposed removals and evictions based on apartheid laws and he stood for victims of the pass laws. '

Church Witness

Against Apartheid

We also have people like The Rev. Michael

Scott. who founded the Campaign for Right and Justice. He was gaoled for helping to organise passive resistance against restriction of Indians in South Africa. He was arrested and convicted for breaking up the , Group Areas Act. by living with Africans in a shanty-town just outside Johannesburg, in solidarity with Blacks.

Another is Father Cosmos Desmond who campaigned vigorously against forced removals, focusing the spotlight on the infamous resettlement camp of Dimbani. For his witness he was banned and house- ' arrested. One would think also of Archbishop Geoffrey Clayton; the controversial Bishop John Williams Colenso; the Very Rev. Aubie Gonville French-Beytagh and many others.

This, though, was not representative of the mainstream tradition of the practices of the church in South Africa. The mainstream ecclesiastical tradition in the main played a legitimising role for the White minority racist government, assisting in concealing the seriousness of the injustice inherent in this system and also in the distortion of the reality in that country.

The Dutch Reformed Church in particular justified the apartheid system theologically, although initially it was based on what was referred to as the 'weakness of some'. Because of the 'weakness of some'. it was agreed that Blacks and Whites should not share in communion together from the same table. This resolution .was taken in 1857 and had disastrous effects on the life of the church and that of society in general in South Africa. or course, there were. and there still are. dissenting prophetic voices like Dr Beyers Naude and others within this tradition.

Prophetic Voices

On the other hand, the churches which belonged mainly within the tradition represented by member-churches of the South African Churches had most of the prophetic voices, such as those referred to above, and prophetic moments like the protest against Bantu Education and the Church Clause issue in the 1950s; the Cottesloe Conference in the early 1960s which rejected racism as incompatible with the Gospel or the Christian faith; the controversial 'message to all South Africans' in 1968 and the resolution on conscientious objection in the 1970s. But, in the main. they were part of the tradition of the dominant ideology which perpetrated .the racist system.

There are three ways in which the church can respond to the crisis we are facing' 111 South Africa. and this can be applied to many other situations.

I The first one is that of support for the system. This is incompatible with the Gospel and any sense of justice in the world.

I The second way is that of non-involvement or neutrality. I wish to submit here that it is completely impossible to re-

main neutral or uninvolved in the face of gross injustices and violation of human rights. Neutrality here is tantamount to support for the status quo.

I The third way is that of a critical involvement in society where the church plays a prophetic role.

It pains me to say that since prophets like Bishop Ambrose Reeves spoke strongly against apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s, neither South Africa nor the world took seriously these isolated but clear prophetic voices. At the United Nations for instance, Bishop Reeves said that the "choice" before the world was a clear one. It was between "effective international action and the probability of bloodshed on a vast scale". Since then we have lost thousands of lives in South Africa.

Sense of Justice Dulled

Bishop Ambrose Reeves said that apartheid had "dulled" the sense of justice of the Whites in South Africa and today, more than a quarter of a century later, there are still people who think that Whites in South Africa can actually demonstrate a sense of justice along with their own privileges guaranteed by apartheid laws.

Today, we are in a worse situation than

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ever before. The moist laws have now firmly been entrenched as a basis of governing that country. White domination and privileges have been secured within the new tricameral constitution whilst, on the other hand, violent means have been employed to suppress and silence the Black majority at great costs.

Obstructing Peace

Lately we have seen the banning of 17 non-violent and peaceful organisations and stringent restrictions imposed on the largest trade union federation in South Africa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU'). We have seen the banning of about 18 respected leaders of the majority of South Africans. Church leaders in South Africa were particularly horrified by the government action of restricting two leaders in the persons of Mrs Albertina Sisulu and Mr. Archie Gumede, co-presidents of the UDF, who were tireless workers in the cause of peace in two of the most desperate crisis areas in our land, - the KTC in Cape Town and the war in Pietermaritzburg. Natal, respectively. From this oppression of peacemakers the church leaders concluded that the authorities are 'deliberately obstructing peace in our country and encouraging violence amongst our people'.

The proclamation of February 24th 1988 prohibited organisations from "carrying on or performing any activities and acts whatsoever". closed all possible effective, non-violent and peaceful means of opposition to apartheid. It is clear from the order that the government is saying to the voiceless and disenfranchised majority, "no peaceful, non-violent, political activity and resistance against apartheid is going to be allowed. Instead, we want you on the battlefield."

The Minister of Law and Order, Mr Adriaan Vlok, continued this interpretation of the order when he said in parliament that these organisations which claimed to be nonviolent realised that they could not succeed militarily against South Africa and thus they used non-violent methods to try and 'overthrow' the state.

The State Chooses Violence

It is this clear choice of violence by those in power which moved church leaders in South Africa to hold an emergency meeting to decide on a couple of actions in this regard. The main concern of churches was that they are the ones who encouraged the liberation movements in South Africa to use non-violent means to end apartheid. The closure therefore, of all non-violent means to change the system created a crisis for the churches. It raised moral questions as to whether those who made these statements could continue doing so without providing alternative avenues for the victims of apartheid. One of the questions was whether we can still accuse the liberation movement of violence if the government has itself openly resorted to violence.

It was because of this crisis that church leaders decided to march to parliament to deliver a petition which urged the State President to take the following immediate action for the sake of peace to avoid bloodshed and death.

I The lifting of the restrictions of the February 24th 1988 and the end of the state of emergency.

I The unbanning of all banned organisations, the release and removal of restrictions on political leaflets, allow exiles to return and free all political detainees.

I Then enter into negotiations to evolve a new dispensation in which all can live together in peace, freedom and justice.

This, the church leaders believed, was the only way in which the problems of South Africa can be resolved. You all know what happened afterwards. The church leaders were summarily arrested and later accused of "choosing violence and communism ' above Christianity" (Adriaan Vlok) in that lamentably peaceful march. They were accused of hiding behind the "cloak of sanctimoniousness" and, warned that the government would not hesitate to act against the church leaders. Like Bishop Reeves who was called a "meddling priest", the church leaders were accused of being "political prisoners."

P W Botha responded to the actions of the church leaders by attacking Archbishop Desmond Tutu and thereby the church leaders in a letter to Archbishop Tutu. This started an exchange of letters which heightened the tension between the Church and the State in South Africa.

Christian Witness

A Life-And-Death Issue

The church leaders nevertheless have re-committed themselves to witness, protest and act to end apartheid, irrespective of the consequences and these attacks against them.

The consequences of the stand of the churches are very serious. The risk has become a physical one. It is a risk in the hands of the official security forces, the risk of church leaders being eliminated or murdered by sophisticated and professional death squads, right-wing units, or crazy individuals motivated by such virulent attacks against specific church leaders as the State President, Mr

P W Botha has done.

News may have reached you already that, following the intensified church-state conflict in South Africa during February and March, physical threats and actual attacks on church leaders and personnel in the church have increased. Reports of attacks on the home of Dr Allan Boesak and his family have been made public, the intensified raids and summary detentions of SACC staff in various regions in the country may have been brought to your notice.

The traumatic hostage drama on April 11th 1988 by a gunman who held one of our staff members, and, threats by a White gunman after midnight this last Friday at Khatso House to force the night watchman to open the building for him; all these acts, by the forces of darkness in defence of the evil and racist apartheid system have turned our Christian witness in apartheid South Africa to a life and death issue.

To be a Christian in South Africa is no more a luxury or just a matter of tradition of 'civilisation' (as those who are victims of so-called western civilisation would call it) or something that is done because others are doing it, or part of a given social norm. To witness to Christ honestly in an evil and racist South Africa is to put your life at risk, even the risk of a violent death.

Moral Choice

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As I have said before in other places, I doubt that we have an option. It does not look like we can avoid the pain and suffering on the cross. We have to challenge the evils of the apartheid system. Here, there is no detour to avoid the cross. —

Under the circumstances, witnessing to the risen Christ might turn to blood-witnessing, turning some to martyrs. That is why church leaders in South Africa said in their petition to the State President:

"We have not undertaken this action lightly. We have no desire to be martyrs. However, the gospel leaves us no choice

but to seek ways of witnessing effectively and clearly to the values of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and you give us Virtually no other effective and peaceful means of doing so. " 1

The issue facing church leaders in South Africa is the question of obedience to God. In the face of the order prohibiting peaceful and non-violent anti-apartheid groups in South Africa carrying out or performing any activities or acts whatsoever, outlawing all forms of effective and peaceful, non-violent political activity and resistance to end apartheid. implying thereby that this could only happen at the battleground, at a violent level. the church i leaders had no option but to act to prevent an all-out bloody war in South Africa. As we have said already the church leaders concluded in their statement that it was the apanheid government which was 'deliberately obstructing peace in our country and encouraging violence among our people'. We have also already said that church leaders argued that the prohibited activities of the 18 organisations were in fact 'central to the proclamation of the Gospel' and thus church leaders were compelled, irrespective of the consequences, to take over these activities insofar as they believed they were mandated by the Gospel. The

church leaders said in their statement:

"Our mandate to carry out these activities comes from God, and no man and government will stop us. "

The statement continues to say:

"If the State wants to act against the Church of God in this country for proclaiming the gospel, then so be it. "

Positive Protest

For the church leaders in South Africa, therefore, the choice is that of obedience to God and, obedience to an earthly human power. It is a choice between the proclaiming of the Gospel which demands justice, peace and

righteousness and the heretic Gospel that not only justifies Botha's evil apartheid system but supports it, thereby contributing to the pain and suffering of the victims of this system. In this respect church leaders have chosen to obey

"God rather than men. " (Acts 5:29)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it succinctly after our attempted peaceful march in Cape Town, which was stopped violently. He said that:

"What we did today is not a negative action of disobeying. It is a positive one of saying (we obey God). We are witnessing for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

If that action has consequences, such as being arrested, then hard luck. We are going to obey God rather than men. "

He ended by saying,

"We are not defying, we are obeying God and we ought to obey God every day. This means that in our obedience to God we are forced to disobey evil and unjust laws. "

One mistake that those in power, particularly the State President, made, was to threaten and warn the church leaders not to continue with their actions of witness and protest, and by launching a vicious and malicious attack on church leaders based on a deliberate distortion of the truth, hoping that by so doing this would deter the church leaders from obeying their God.

The mistake over P W Botha is to assume that Archbishop Tutu's statement, that if this "witness has consequences, such as being arrested then hard luck, we are going to obey God rather than man," is just an ordinary human intellectual statement. No, this is no luxurious statement at the level of the intellect only, but it is a statement of faith, a religious statement. It is a matter of obedience to God!

The recent praxis of the church in South Africa is a call for the church of Christ in the world to rediscover the evangelical tradition of the early church. In a world where evil abounds, where there is less and less justice for the poor and powerless majority, the church is called to express its witness. And, faced with these enormous and fearful forces of evil, it might, in so doing, be changed from the church, a church of Christ.

Servants of God'

It is not just a call for, a rediscovery of the

evangelical tradition of the early church. We have long standing traditions of servants of God throughout the history of the church who stood in obedience to God. The "here I stand. I cannot do otherwise" is not a new tradition in the Christian church. As I have shown already we have contemporary examples of this type of witness in South Africa. In this list I would like to add the most recent and current prophets of our times. /

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Dr Beyers Naude. Dr 'Allan Boesak. Father Smangalis Mkhathshwa. Archbishop Denis Hurley and the Revd Dr Simon Unbulu, . who is subjected to restrictions which amount to house arrest.

I would like to conclude by saying that the struggle for freedom justice and peace continues in South Africa. The forces against us are enormous. But by faith we believe that we shall be free one day. Our hope for freedom - that our freedom is certain - is a matter of faith. It is based on our belief that goodness and righteousness shall prevail against evil. and that justice shall prevail, because God is on our side, on the side of justice.

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DOES THE CHURCH
LEAD THE STRUGGLE?

A CAUTION ' '

By The Reverend John Lamola
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In the current phase of our struggle there is on

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unprecedented radical involvement of organised Christianity in opposing the Botha regime. This article analyses the role of the churches in the liberation struggle at this time.

Since the clampdown on internal organisations was announced in February 1988, church , leaders inside the country have emerged as runners who have grabbed the baton from the activists and are continuing the race to our liberation. The press and mass media both inside and outside South Africa have been compelled to give prominent publicity to the activities of church leaders. Even inside the liberation movement one can hear a general observation that. "the church is now the only force left for internal legal resistance."

In this article. however. we will present a view which sounds a caution against over estimating the role that the institutional church can play in our revolution. Organised religion, like any other material force in the broad-allied and multi-strategised struggle of ours. has a definite role that needs to be analysed, defined and made known. There is a limit to what the church in South Africa can help achieve in our struggle. The church. as all religion. has at particular scope of Operation which needs to be recognised, so that it can be supplemented by other revolutionary forces.

Dangers to Avoid

'The lurking danger at the moment facing our struggle in this regard is two-pronged. I First, the activities of church leaders in the resistance movement may lead to a sense among the struggling masses that the church is going to bring about the fall of Pretoria. and that all they have to do is just to support the church. Subconsciously they mydriftintoacatalepsis, a paralysis of the community, that prevents it from taking responsibility for its social life.

I On the other hand, an atmosphere is being created in which the church leaders and institutions are led to develop a false self-confidence, and come to believe that ' they can handle and lead a process of political change, to an extent where they will want to impose their own kind of methods of struggle and solutions which have not been subject to the general review of the liberation movement. The second danger seems most imminent when one considers the problem of communication that exists between church leaders and the leaders of the people's revolutionary movement. w

Raising these issues does not, of course, in any way call for a refusal to acknowledge and commend the partnership of the church in the struggle for liberation. It is primarily inspired by a belief in the political principle that there is a need continually to engage in a critical evaluation of the process and dynamics of our revolution. Also, it comes from the author's concerns as a theologian and as one who has been working as a church leader inside South Africa.

Background: x

The Kairos Document

During the heat of the 1984-1985 mass uprisings, a group of theologians came together to assess the way in which the church was involved in the crisis of the day. Priests were saying, "We are tired of burying the victims of apartheid every week-end. Is there nothing more that we are called to

8 / ' do?" The result was the publication of the Kairos Document.

.This document was to be a historical watershed, in that not only did it expose the quasi-religious propaganda of the apartheid regime, but went further to castigate the theological model which was being used in the churches. which, until then, were acclaimed as liberal, anti-apartheid churches.

The Kairos theologians reported:

"We have analysed the statements that are made from time to time by the so-called English-speaking churches. We have looked at what church leaders tend to say in their speeches and press statements about the apartheid regime ' and the present crisis. " '

They continued:

"What we found running through all these pronouncements is a series of interrelated theological assumptions (which we) call 'church theology'... The

crisis in which we find ourselves today compels us to question this theology. to question its assumptions. its implications and its practicality!"

The document went on to explain that how the church perceived and applied concepts such as 'reconciliation' and 'justice' and non-violence' was a transplantation of stock ideas from a Chn'stian tradition that is totally unrelated to our revolutionary situation.

What was most significant about the Kairos Document, however. was that it was not written by the leaders and big-names of the church. It was produced by a group of grassroots priests, pastors and nuns, who were daily interacting with the people and i who were dodging the rubber bullets every week-end in the cemeteries of the townships. It is a fact of history that in fact some 'progressive' church leaders went on record in the public media as rejecting the Kairos Document.

The Charch in Struggle

What the document revealed was that the 'church in struggle' is not a perfect and holy partner. By announcing a call to action and
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Christians carry a comrade to his grave at Mphophomenir near Howick,
' t April 1988 . t -

pronouncing the justifiability of the right of
the oppressed to defend themselves
against the violence of the state. and by
declaring the apartheid regime an il-
legitimate tyranny, the Kairos Document set
the standard of revolutionary South African
theology, and marked the trail that the
church still has to travel before it can be a
servant of the revolution.

Following the restriction of the UDF.
COSATU and other organisations, as well
as the banning of 18 of the people's leaders
church leaders were compelled to take it
to the streets.

The inside background information to
this is that the church leaders - all the
leaders of major denominations and
African indigenous churches - were in
'fact acting on incipient pressure from the
masses. Since the Kairos Document, and
the Lusaka Declaration in May 1987, a
serious debate has been taking place on
the position of the church as regards the
armed struggle. By February 1988, argu-
ments had been closed; the ordinary peo-
ple cannot be expected to go out on
pickets, and even stayaways. without ex-
pecting to be met with bullets and lengthy
detentions. It is' only high-profile church
leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu,
the Nobel Prize Laureate. whom the state
detains only after thinking many times, who
still have the space to engage in non-violent
action. .

Also, those who still preached non- . ' '
violent resistance against apartheid, Arch-
bishop Tutu notable among them, were all
along challenged by the comrades who

said that they must not only talk. they must act out their non-violent strategies against the Botha regime, and demonstrate the efficacy of peaceful protest.

The Church Challenged

Therefore, the clampdown of February 28th 1988 presented a challenge to the leadership of the church, in that the non-violent activity people had been engaged in through the UDF had been proscribed. which meant that now at last a justification for massanned activity was indisputable. The bishops acted swiftly to demonstrate - to show that we can still engage in non-violent action against the regime. They went more to prove a point to the masses than to confront P W Botha. Anyway, they were not naive enough not to know that they would not be allowed to demonstrate near the White houses of parliament in Cape Town.

However. there appeared in the petition addressed to Botha a very interesting fact that shows how the grassroots masses are in control of the direction of the struggle:

"Last week many of us issued a statement in which we addressed primarily V the oppressed people of our land, for we believe it is they who will decide in the final analysis when apartheid is going to be abolished.

" We urged them to intensify the struggle for justice and peace and we encouraged them not to lose hope, for victory against evil in this world is guaranteed by our Lord. "3

This section of the petition is an apt pre-emptive response to the criticism the church leaders knew they would face from the masses for addressing P W Botha. because it is a principle established not only in the Kairos Document that Botha has no legitimate authority to dictate over order in South Africa today and that genuine political change never comes from the privileged but from the disgruntled masses.

There is a creative tension between the thinking and methods of the church today in South Africa and the revolutionary consciousness of the struggling masses. This tension, which is a healthy critical relationship. needs to be maintained. It must not be allowed to be flooded away by showers of uncritical accolades the churches give to the struggle.

What Is the Church?

According to the 1980 census. 77% of all South Africans belong to some church denomination.³ The meaning of this, and the famous fact that many leaders of the liberation movement are practising Christians, seals the fact that the church in South Africa is intrinsically an organisation that encompasses the ordinary life of the people. Therefore, one can expect a tension to exist between the community activists, students. trade unionists and peasants who fill the church pews every Sunday after a tough life of struggle during the week. and,

on the other hand, the church leaders, the majority of whom are still drawn from the White upper class which is insulated from the brutalities of the reality of apartheid. From a revolutionary point of view. however, the church can be seen as either of the following:

I A force of struggle. This is a view that inspires agitation for the conscientisation of the church leadership. The goal of this perception of the church would be the wish to see the church in South Africa as a liberated zone. and also as the embodiment of the struggle of the masses. that is, as 'the ANC at prayer.' This is exactly the thinking behind over-estimation of the role of the church in the struggle.

I A site of struggle, in correction to the first view.

An analysis becoming increasingly popular in South Africa is that, just as the factory and the school grounds are sites of struggle, so is the church. It is an arena where people come together to form a community, and from which they get whatever inspiration and protection they can. From there, they launch out towards the enemy, either 'in the name of the church' or as individuals who have been mobilised by relevant theology.

But, just as the capitalist factory and the Bantu education school are not only sites of struggle but also targets of struggle. so is the bourgeois, sexist, authoritarian church. We propose the latter view of the church - that is, the church as a site of struggle - as an antidote to the dangers we have looked at in this article. The view of the church as a site of struggle helps to free us to adhere, as Christians, to a belief in the social progress of history which holds a vision of the withering away of all forms of authoritarianism and unscientific self-consciousness. We can consent that the church, like all structures of society, will be expected to make appropriate social adjustments in the progress of history.

The Church a Battlefield

We therefore agree with Comrade Rev. Cedric Mayson in his comment on ideological differences within the church, that:

"The church is not an army but a battlefield. It is one of the places where the struggle is being waged, and it is necessary to analyse the forces involved in that conflict in relation to the revolution."4

In conclusion and in retrospect, let us state three other issues.

I Christian theology is one of the most disputed among human areas of enquiry.

. It is a field which is strewn with historical contradictions, age-old, unresolved debates and innumerable schisms. No one today can authoritatively tell us what is good Christian theology. It will therefore be a suicidal act for our struggle to be allowed to steer into trusteeship people and institutions that derive political activity solely from Christian theological formulations.

Just as Christians cannot, by the very nature of Christianity, agree on purely spiritual and theological matters, one cannot expect any particular Christian body to lead a broad movement of national unity.

...1 Because ours is a broad-based and national movement which has to draw people from all religious persuasions, to attribute supremacy to the pontification of one religion would be disastrous.

Our struggle has always been for the creation of a secular state which guarantees the freedom of religion. On this murky road towards this goal, a multi-faith approach towards adopting an alliance of the religious sector in the struggle is imperative. Christian church leaders need to be reminded that there are no plans for the creation of a Christian state, but we are all working for the creation of a state that will take into account Christian values, just as it will those of other religions. Therefore, they should know that their assertive pontification over the course and methods of the struggle is not the Alpha and Omega, not the beginning and end, of how we should achieve our liberation.

I Church leaders in South Africa need to be assisted in taking seriously the implications of the declaration of the moral il-

legitimacy of the Pretoria regime. A prime implication of this is an assertion of the right of the people to achieve freedom through leaders and political structure of their choice. Therefore, when speaking 't'or the people, ' they must ensure that they are genuinely promoting the programme of the people. .

An accountability must be expected on how the church represents the struggle. This. of course. necessitates the promotion of consultationbetween the religious structures and the people's political structures. This will ensure that the church is not conducting the struggle on the basis of a different agenda, and that the capabilities of the church in the struggle will be known, and appropriately supplernented, from other forces.

Footnotes:

1. The Kaims Document, a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1985, p. 9.
2. Baptist Times. March 24th 1988. Christian Aid advertisement. p. 5.
- 3 I.de Gruchy, 'The Church Struggle in' South Africa. Collins. London, 1986. second edition, p. 242.
4. The Afri'can Communist, No 110. Third Quarter 1987, London p. 54.

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