

THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH MILITANT

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No one, during the outcry that followed a recent sermon delivered in New York by the Archbishop of Cape Town, questioned the truth of his remark that the Dutch Reformed Church (D.R.C.) gives "tacit approval" to the apartheid policies of the South African Government. And certainly one of the favourite principles of the apartheid-mongers in this country is that non-Europeans should at all times be encouraged to minister to the needs of their own people in their own territories.

Yet here is the story of a Coloured minister who has not only been refused entry into a Coloured territory, but has also been prohibited from ministering to his congregation there: while members of the congregation have been prosecuted and convicted for conducting their own prayer meetings in his absence. Moreover, the two bodies who have been directly and indirectly responsible for these prohibitions are the Government and the Dutch Reformed Church.

The series of events which led up to this anomalous situation began nearly ten years ago. The Reverend I. D. Morkel was then a minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. He was the manager of the Dutch Reformed Mission School at Crawford, Cape Town, and chairman of the Wynberg Ring. Before he became a minister he had been a successful business man and so he was well able to support himself while he studied theology; and the energy and intelligence which had brought him financial success now enabled him to come first in his class at the D.R. Seminary where he was trained. He was obviously making a great success of his religious career too, although for some time before his final break with the D.R.C. he had become known as an opponent of apartheid and thus an embarrassment to his church. He had, for instance, declared that Coloured people were coming to Cape Town or going overseas to escape persecution in the rural areas. Eventually in October, 1950, he announced that he could no longer "preach love and practise apartheid" and that he was leaving the D.R.C. to become the founder and leader of the South African Calvinist Protestant

Church (C.P.C.) which, although it naturally has a large majority of Coloured members, does not in any way practise discrimination on the grounds of colour.

We should point out here just how the D.R.C. does practise segregation. It was only during the latter half of the nineteenth century that this church began to carry out mission work amongst the Coloured people to any appreciable extent. Once this work was established, however, it became evident that Europeans might have to be joined by large numbers of non-Europeans come to worship under the same roof and even to sit on the same benches as they did. It was not long before a minority group began agitating for a separation, and the Synod of 1857, as a sop to the "weakness of some members", made provision for the congregation "assembled or to be assembled from among the Heathen to enjoy its religious privileges in a separate building". In 1881, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church was established, and today all non-European members belong to this branch. The Mission Church has separate ministers, both European and non-European, who are all distinguished by the title *Eerwaarde* and who receive a much lower salary than their colleagues, the *Dominees*, of the main church. It also has, of course, separate congregations, buildings and church organizations. It has the right to form its own synods, but owing to the poverty of its congregations it is financially dependent to a considerable degree on *die Moeder Kerk*. (the Mother Church).

Mr Morkel's new church flourished, and five years after its inception, had grown to six branches with four ministers and over 2,000 members. Today there are about 13,000 members, not confined to Cape Town and the Peninsula. In that part of the North-Western Cape known as Little Namaqualand there are several Coloured Reserves, and in one of these, Komaggas, the Calvinist Protestant Church was welcomed with particular enthusiasm, although it was not until 1956 that they asked Mr Morkel to visit them. On December 8 he held a service in the open, and nearly a third of the entire population of the Reserve attended, while only 26 people were at the service in the D.R.C.

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Mission work was begun around Komaggas by the London Missionary Society in 1810, but in 1840 they handed over their work to the Rhenish Missionaries.

From 1843 to 1912 the community enjoyed a considerable degree of independence. It was administered by a *Raad* (council) elected by the men and presided over by the missionary, without whose concurrence no decision was valid. Two or three elders of the Church also held positions on the *Raad*.

This alliance between the Church and the community always operated extremely efficiently since the missionary was an integrated member of the society. In fact, one of the early missionaries, the Rev. J. H. Schmelen, married a "pious Hottentot woman".

This alliance, however, came to an end in 1912 when the Mission Stations and Communal Reserves Act of 1909 was first applied—one section of the Act abolished the secular authority of the missionaries.

In terms of the Act also the *Raad* was superseded by a Board of Management consisting of nine members and a Chairman. Six of the members are elected by the male registered occupiers. The other three are appointed by the Commissioner for Coloured affairs, one of them on the recommendation of the missionary. The Chairman, who has a deliberative as well as a casting vote, is an official of the Division of Coloured Affairs and is appointed and paid by the Government.

In the light of subsequent events it is necessary to emphasize here that at least four votes are inevitably cast in favour of government policy. If an issue frowned upon by the Government should arise, only one of the elected members would have to be in favour of it for it to fail, for the Chairman would undoubtedly use his casting vote against it.

The Rhenish Mission Society continued its work in Komaggas until 1936; for its last few years it experienced great difficulty in getting funds from its headquarters in Germany, and it was not easy either, under the Nazi regime, to find young men willing or able to go as missionaries to Africa. Thus it was forced to give up its work in Namaqualand, and its place was taken by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church.

This church had been assisting the Rhenish missionaries for nearly twenty-five years, but it had never been popular at Komaggas, and only a section of the community were in favour of its taking over the religious jurisdiction of the Reserve. Some of the inhabitants would perhaps have preferred at that time an Anglican missionary—a deputation of ten elders from Komaggas was once sent to an English Rector in Namaqualand. There is

also a small Roman Catholic group in the Reserve, and they, like the Anglicans, have in the past always been ministered to by their own priests

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The Calvinist Protestant Church can be said to have taken the community by storm. During the first fourteen months after Mr Morkel was invited to Komaggas, 256 children were baptised and 90 young people confirmed. There are now about 600 confirmed members and a large number of baptised members who have not yet been confirmed. On May 5, 1957, a petition containing more than 700 signatures was presented to Dr I. D. du Plessis (Commissioner for Coloured Affairs) asking for permission to acquire land on which to erect a church.

The request was refused.

Mr Morkel and his congregation at Komaggas continued in their pleas and were always assured by Dr du Plessis that he was prepared to treat their case sympathetically and that after the passing of new regulations in October everything would be settled to their satisfaction.

And on October 25, 1957, the Minister of the Interior did issue these regulations. Regulation 88, sub-regulation (i) lays down that:

“Any person who, without the approval of the Commissioner or the magistrate of the area concerned,

(a) Holds, presides at or addresses any meeting, gathering or assembly at which more than five persons in the area under the control of the Board of Management are present at any one time; or (b) Permits any such meeting, gathering or assembly to be held in his house or on other premises or land under his control, shall be guilty of an offence.”

Sub-regulation (ii), however, does make it possible for more than five persons to gather, without permission, for events such as funerals, weddings, political meetings presided over by M.P.'s and religious services held by the established church or churches in the area, etc.

The Anglican, the Roman Catholic and the Calvinist Protestant Churches now had to obtain permission before they could minister to more than five of their congregation at one time—here in fact was a virtual ban on all religious services or meetings held by any denomination other than the Dutch Reformed, for, of course, no such permission has been forthcoming.

So much for Dr du Plessis' assurances!

What followed the passing of these regulations? The first prosecution took place on March 7, 1958. Three members of the Calvinist Protestant Church were found guilty of holding a meeting of more than five persons in the Komaggas Reserve. At the meeting a prayer was said, a hymn sung and a short sermon was delivered. The three men were fined £3 each, suspended for three years.

Mr Morkel then applied for permission just to send four ministers to spend eight days in the Reserves of Komaggas and Concordia (which also has a small C.P.C. congregation) from April 16 to 23. On April 17 he was finally told that permission would be granted to only one minister to work for only one day in each Reserve. This was a pitifully inadequate concession, but it was accepted. The minister and an elder who accompanied him arrived the night before at Komaggas and were welcomed by 700 people. Before dawn the next day about 600 people were waiting for the first service. They had walked miles to be there; many had children on their backs. The minister had to attend 40 baptisms, officiate at confirmations and confirmation classes, a Church Council meeting, a woman's auxiliary meeting, hold two full services, one with communion, and travel many miles visiting the sick and the aged. His day began at 4.30 a.m. and ended late at night.

On July 2, 1958, two more persons were convicted of contravening the regulations. Johannes Damon lent some land to Martha Regons and she, with a prayer book in her hand, conducted a short service attended by about twenty-five people. They were cautioned and discharged by the magistrate, but they intend to appeal against their conviction.

In a neighbouring Reserve also under the religious jurisdiction of the D.R. Church, the Roman Catholic and Anglican congregations were threatened with prosecution if they continued to hold services without permission. Although their priests have applied for permission, it has not yet been granted. It is significant that prosecutions and threats have been made only in Mission Stations and Reserves under the religious jurisdiction of the D.R.C.

A good deal of publicity was given to these incidents in the press, and Dr du Plessis made a statement explaining his refusal of permission. He declared that he had followed the "essentially democratic course of letting the people choose for them-

selves". He did not in fact feel called upon to make any decision in the matter since the Board of Management which "represents the people" had refused permission for the establishment of Mr Morkel's church in the area.

It is perhaps important to point out that, whatever followed their promulgation, the regulations are in themselves a serious threat to the religious and political freedom of these Coloured communities. Not only should Regulation 88 never have been applied, but it should never have been issued in a country claiming the title of a democracy.

In conclusion we might consider who is finally responsible for the denial of a fundamental right to this particular group of people.

The Government? As we have mentioned already, the withholding of permission from the C.P.C. to establish itself in the Coloured Reserves is a negation of true apartheid. But if apartheid should interfere with the greater cause of White domination, it is presumably a matter of indifference to the Nationalists that it should be temporarily cast aside.

The Dutch Reformed Church? We should not underestimate the part it has played in this affair. In January 1957, shortly after Mr Morkel had been first invited to the Reserves, a party of D.R.C. officials visited the various congregations expressly to warn them against what they termed the "Morkel danger". They tried to show that he was an unreliable and irresponsible character himself, and that his church was a new sect which was completely alien to the D.R.C. In fact, of course, the C.P.C. differs from it in no respect as regards belief, doctrine or ritual. Mr Morkel's is in no sense a separatist, sectarian movement—he is simply an opponent of the political ideals of the D.R.C. and a threat to its power amongst the Coloured people. But this church is so unremittingly wedded to these ideals and clings so tenaciously to its temporal power that it has willingly connived at the application of an unjust law which condemns a thousand people to a life without the proper comforts of their religion. Perhaps, however, it has done more than connive, for in terms of one of the sections of Regulation 88, the Commissioner for Coloured Affairs had first to consult with the established church in the area concerned before granting or refusing the Calvinist Protestant Church permission to continue its work.