

# APARTHEID IS A HERESY

"Apartheid is a heresy". This was the historic declaration made by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (W.A.R.C.) at Ottawa in August 1982. This review article of a recent book under that title seeks to explore some of the implications of this declaration for the South African churches in 1984.

## The Churches' Judgement on Apartheid in 1948.

Firstly it needs to be seen that the statement "apartheid is a heresy" differs from all previous condemnations of racism by the churches. When the National Party came to power in 1948 its manifesto claimed that the policy of apartheid was "separation on Christian principles of justice and reasonableness".<sup>1</sup> Authoritative statements by assemblies and synods of churches in South Africa as well as those of world confessional organisations have consistently challenged this claim. However, such official church statements condemning apartheid stopped short of saying that apartheid is a **heresy**. For instance a resolution of the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in 1948 said that "discrimination between men on grounds of race alone is **inconsistent with the principles of Christ's religion**".<sup>2</sup> In the same year the Congregational Church in South Africa said that apartheid "has no sanction in New Testament Scriptures",<sup>3</sup> whilst the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of South Africa expressed a political judgement in addressing a resolution to Dr. D.F. Malan in 1948, characterising his intention to "take from non-Europeans their long-established and pledged rights to vote on the common roll" as a "retrograde step".<sup>4</sup> Because the new Prime Minister, himself an ordained minister of the N.G.K., asserted that his policy was neither un-Christian nor immoral, and because his denials were endorsed by the synods of the three Afrikaans Reformed Churches in South Africa it appeared that the question of whether or not apartheid was to be condemned on Christian grounds was still a matter for further theological and political debate. There were, however, a few individuals who went further than official church condemnations of apartheid at that time.

## Trevor Huddleston said it was a Heresy in 1956.

It is significant that Trevor Huddleston as long ago as 1956 wrote that racialism in any form is an "inherent blasphemy" against the nature of God who has created man in his own image, saying also that the Calvinism of the Afrikaner "like all heresies and deviations from Catholic truth . . . is sub-Christian".<sup>5</sup> The significance of Trevor Huddleston's condemnation of apartheid as a "heresy" and a "blasphemy" in *Naught for your Comfort* was not that he had found a more vehement expletive with which to denounce a policy which he deplored because of its evil effects upon the lives of his African parishioners in Sophiatown. He knew that such a political ideology, precisely because it is a heresy, had to be resisted both in theory and in practice by all

possible means. The claim made by the synods of the N.G.K. that there were "**skriftuurlike gronde**" to support "**rasse-apartheid**" understood as, **afsonderlike, eiesoortige ontwikkeling**"<sup>6</sup> had to be denounced not merely as false but as heretical. The truth implicit in this statement which angered Afrikaners was that those who support apartheid could not continue to regard themselves as Christians. Thus the South African Prime Minister at the time, Mr. J.G. Strijdom, said that Huddleston was attempting to "slander the white man in South Africa" and "to incite not only the outside world against South Africa, but also the non-whites in South Africa".<sup>7</sup> Huddleston's forceful critique of South Africa's policy of apartheid was thus written off as the prejudiced invective of a foreign missionary. The reviewer of *Naught for your Comfort* for the *Cape Times* with greater prescience, having suggested that Huddleston was not in step with the hierarchy of his church, added that the publication of his book could open up a new phase in attitudes to South Africa abroad, and concluded, "If his arguments are invalid they will fall away. But I doubt if his evidence will easily be forgotten".<sup>8</sup>

## Apartheid in word and deed is a Heresy.

The truth of Huddleston's prophetic stand against apartheid in the fifties is being demonstrated now. Where the contention that apartheid is a heresy used to be regarded as the **personal opinion** of some individuals, it is now the **declared belief** of a significant cross-section of South African churches. Three months after the W.A.R.C. decision at Ottawa, Huddleston's own church in South Africa, the C.P.S.A., declared apartheid to be "totally un-Christian, evil and a heresy".<sup>9</sup> A few weeks earlier the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in its turn had declared that "apartheid is not simply a socio-political policy, but a sinful contradiction of the Gospel which cannot be justified on biblical or theological grounds and is therefore, an ideology which the Methodist Church rejects as a heresy".<sup>10</sup> The N.G. Sendingkerk, also in 1982, in an impressive statement on apartheid, issued a confession of faith which accused the N.G.K. of "theological heresy and idolatry" for supporting apartheid which it described as a "pseudo-religious ideology".<sup>11</sup> In 1982 the Congregational Church, whilst not saying explicitly that apartheid is a heresy, resolved that it could not engage in dialogue with those white Dutch Reformed Churches "as long as they refuse to declare apartheid as sinful and to confess their complicity in the suffering and oppression of our people".<sup>12</sup> The Presbyterian Church at its Assembly in 1982, having re-affirmed its decision of the previous year to ignore state restrictions on inter-racial marriages, merely referred the W.A.R.C. decision for comment to local church bodies.<sup>13</sup> At their respective Assemblies in 1983, whereas the Presbyterians rejected a resolution

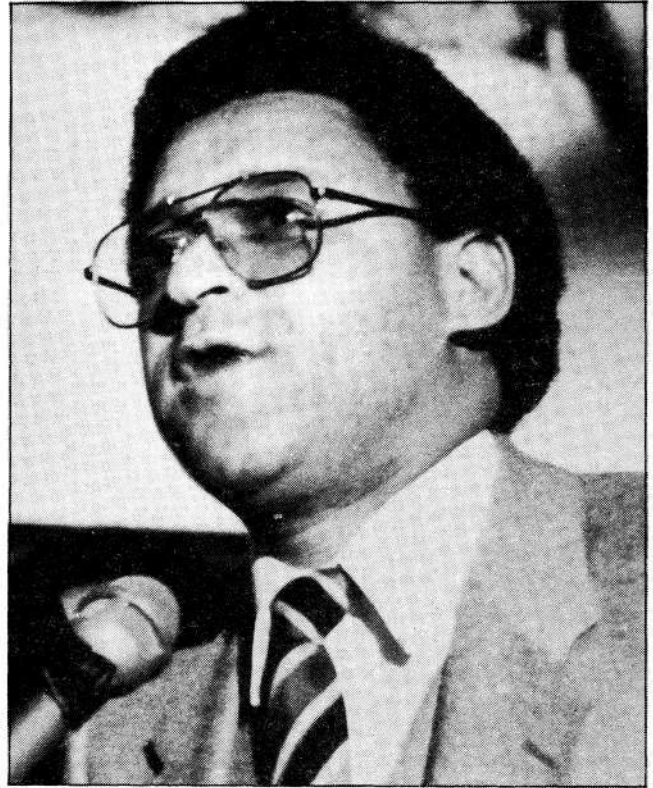
endorsing the W.A.R.C. decision of the previous year, the Congregational Church declared any theological justification of apartheid to be heresy.<sup>14</sup> What then of the Roman Catholic Church? It is interesting that the S.A. Catholic Bishops' Conference, in a pastoral letter read in all Catholic churches on 21st July 1957 condemned apartheid because "separate development is subordinate to white supremacy".

The white man makes himself the agent of God's will and the interpreter of His providence in assigning the range and determining the bounds of non-white development. One trembles at the **blasphemy** of thus attributing to God the offences against charity and justice that are apartheid's necessary accompaniment.<sup>15</sup>

In 1948, when the S.A.C.B.C. did not yet exist, Bishop Hennemann in a pastoral letter to his vicariate in Cape Town described apartheid as a "noxious, unChristian and destructive policy".<sup>16</sup>

### **A Status Confessionis for all South African Churches**

The value of a recent book edited by John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio entitled **Apartheid is a Heresy** is the way it documents in a concise appendix various church statements associated with the historic decision by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at Ottawa in August 1982 to declare apartheid to be a heresy and to suspend the Afrikaans Reformed Churches from its membership as long as they continue to support apartheid.<sup>17</sup> The book also contains nine splendid articles which examine the issue of apartheid from a number of perspectives. First among them is the address delivered by Dr. Allan Boesak to the W.A.R.C. at Ottawa which then not only decided to declare apartheid to be a heresy, but also elected him as its President. Dr. Boesak urged the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, as a confessional family of reformed churches to which the Afrikaans Reformed Churches still belonged, to agree that "racism is sin", "apartheid is a pseudo-gospel" and that the situation in South Africa constitutes a **status confessionis** for the Reformed Churches in South Africa.<sup>18</sup> As Bishop Desmond Tutu writes, because apartheid blasphemes the divine intention in creation "apartheid contradicts the testimony of the Bible categorically",<sup>19</sup> and must on these grounds alone be rejected as a heresy. The immorality of apartheid may be judged by its results: "if these are evil, then the probability is that the original act or policy is itself evil".<sup>20</sup> The value of this book is not merely that a number of leading theologians who are members of the N.G.K., N.G. Sendingkerk, Congregational, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches in South Africa each give some compelling reasons why the W.A.R.C. decision is not only right but long overdue. For all of these theologians, the declaration that apartheid is a heresy is not merely an opinion, but a profession of faith. Unlike even the **Message to the People of South Africa** in 1968<sup>21</sup> and indeed all previous declarations by the South African churches on apartheid, the W.A.R.C. decision at Ottawa in 1982 may be compared to the **Barmen Declaration** of the Confessing Church in Germany in 1934<sup>22</sup> and even to the 95 theses which Martin Luther pinned to the door of his church at Wittenberg on All Saints' Eve in 1517.<sup>23</sup> "Here I stand, I can do no other" is the decision of each individual.<sup>24</sup> Thus the relevant question now becomes not why, when or whether apartheid is indeed to be declared a heresy. It is the impli-



Dr. Allan Boesak

Natal Witness

cations of applying this far-reaching decision in practice which are going to be crucial for Christians in South Africa.

### **The Time for a Confessing Church has arrived.**

In his excellent article John de Gruchy considers the implications of the W.A.R.C. decision, and suggests that the moment has come for South African Christians to establish a Confessing Church.<sup>25</sup> There were some who thought that such a moment had come in 1957 when most South African churches declared they would refuse to obey Clause 29 (c) of Dr. Verwoerd's Native Laws Amendment Act.<sup>26</sup> A similar point came in the aftermath to the Cottesloe Consultation of December 1960.<sup>27</sup> Then in 1968 a Theological Commission of the South African Council of Churches published its **Message to the People of South Africa**. The visit to South Africa of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge in 1973 raised the question of a confessing church again, but as Dr. de Gruchy observes, "the answer was ambivalent".<sup>28</sup> Consideration of the question of a confessing church then lapsed until the S.A.C.C. convened a consultation of black Christian leaders at Hammanskraal in February 1980.<sup>29</sup> This meeting called upon all white Christians to demonstrate their willingness to "purge the Church of racism", giving an ultimatum that if there was no concrete action within twelve months black Christians would have no alternative but to become a confessing church. This ultimatum was not implemented and Dr. de Gruchy rightly sees the next decisive step as being the emergence of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa (ABRECSA) in October 1981 under the chairmanship of Dr. Alan Boesak. It was the ABRECSA Charter which stated:—

We, as members of ABRECSA, unequivocally declare that apartheid is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, a betrayal of the reformed tradition and a heresy.<sup>30</sup>

It was thus the ABRECSA Charter which paved the way for the W.A.R.C. decision a year later.

### **Differing Black and White Perceptions and Priorities.**

The development of the idea that apartheid is a heresy, even among leading black theologians and church leaders in South Africa, has taken time to germinate. I attended the Annual Conference of the South African Council of Churches in 1978 and recall vividly the trend of a debate which developed over a resolution condemning apartheid. Its proposer, who lived in Soweto, demanded the repeal of all apartheid laws and called upon Christians to disregard such legislation should the Government not take immediate steps to remove all discriminatory legislation from the statute book. The wording of this resolution was thus open to criticism for being unwise and impractical, in so far as there was every likelihood that both the Government and a considerable proportion of white Christians belonging to the S.A.C.C. member churches would ignore it. Such criticism by whites, however, ignored the deep sense of resentment felt by blacks about apartheid only two years after the Soweto riots. The then President of the Methodist Conference, Dr. Donald Veysie, then proposed an amendment to this loosely-worded resolution, which would have reduced the force of the condemnation of apartheid intended by its proposers. In an impromptu speech I urged that apartheid was so repugnant to the mind of most of those present that the S.A.C.C. Conference should not only make its condemnation of apartheid more specific, but also that we should declare apartheid to be both a theological and a moral heresy and proposed an alternative amendment to this effect. My amendment found a seconder but caused some concern. The Revd. Joe Wing, the Congregational leader, pointed out that whilst everyone would wish to condemn apartheid in the strongest terms, to declare apartheid to be a heresy could have some unfortunate consequences. By declaring the policy of one political party to be a heresy we would unleash a witch-hunt in the congregations of our churches in which the political convictions of every parishioner would be put on trial. Division and acrimony would be the only result. When the vote was taken there were just thirteen who voted to declare apartheid to be a heresy, amongst over a hundred delegates of whom two-thirds were black.

### **Will 1984 be George Orwell's year in South Africa?**

Conscription ensures tight Government control over South African whites, just as the National Party's legislation for apartheid and state security has cast its totalitarian shadow over all people of colour in South Africa since 1950. Those churches which have declared apartheid to be a heresy now face the far-reaching implications of that decision, as much as Christians of churches who have so far refrained from taking this stand. Since two-thirds of white voters have said "Yes" to a Constitution which most readers of *Reality* would judge to be a device which entrenches apartheid, there will be many who worship in Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Congregational pews who will not sit comfortably with the assertion that apartheid is a heresy. Will a vote for the National Party debar them from membership of their churches? At the same time there are also some indications of a serious reconsideration of the N.G.K.'s legitimisation of apartheid. In 1974 the General Synod of the N.G.K. adopted in an amended form the findings of

the Commission on Race Relations under the chairmanship of Ds. W.A. Landman. Dr. Villa-Vicencio rightly describes the findings of this commission as revised by the N.G.K. Synod in 1974, *Ras, Volk en Nasie, en Volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*,<sup>31</sup> as "firmly grounded in the framework of apartheid and provides a Scriptural basis for apartheid and white domination".<sup>32</sup> In 1982 this report was however referred to a revisions committee, which is due to report to the next General Synod of the N.G.K. which is due to meet in July 1984. Already the N.G.K. (Western Cape) Synod has in 1983 passed a resolution repudiating its earlier stand in support of apartheid. In February 1984 an important meeting is to be held at which the heads of certain major South African churches will be creating the necessary organisation to arrange a Christian National Convention to be held in 1986.<sup>33</sup> Whilst such vigorous Christian witness for justice and freedom may yet save South Africa from a growing tendency towards totalitarianism in Government, this will not be achieved without a deeper conflict between Church and State.

### **Are Church and State on a collision course in South Africa?**

1984 will see the publication of the report of the Eloff Commission of Enquiry into the affairs of the South African Council of Churches. The Government's response to this report could precipitate the collision. A collision may however be unavoidable. If on the one hand South Africa's so-called multi-racial churches do indeed implement their decision, so that apartheid is repudiated as a heresy in both word and deed, and at the same time the Botha Government implements the Republic of South Africa Constitution Act of 1983, Christians will indeed be faced with a *status confessionis*. 1984 is thus going to be a year in which the consciences of God-fearing Christians in South Africa will be put to the test. That is why a close study of *Apartheid is a Heresy*, edited by de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, is to be commended to all, as indeed are the editors of this volume for getting it published so timeously. I had meant to write this article before the Referendum. Its contents become even more relevant now.

### **Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis: Words and Deeds**

The significance of the declaration that apartheid is both sinful and a heresy means that orthodoxy of belief is not enough. Orthopraxis, that is orthodoxy in practice, is also required from every church and every Christian. The holding of a Christian National Convention in 1986 could thus well provide the springboard for the creation of a Confessing Church in South Africa whose creed will include an absolute and decisive repudiation of all forms of discrimination on grounds of race or colour. Apartheid, like sin, will not however die easily. There is therefore likely to be an intensification of the conflict between church and state, in which much will depend on the decision about apartheid by the General Synod of the N.G.K. in July 1984. Much will also depend on the courage and integrity of Christians in the so-called multi-racial churches. Will they practise what they preach and in deed and word live by their profession that apartheid is a heresy? Will the Botha Government bow to such pressure? If there is indeed a need to found a Confessing Church in South Africa, this suggests that George Orwell's chilling predictions for 1984 are not without relevance for this beleaguered sub-continent. □

*References on Page 20.*