

# " NEVERTHELESS... "

## a variety of religious protest

by Tim Dunne.

Let me confess at the outset that the views and opinions I am about to lay before you are unashamedly personal and subjective. They are not intended to be an academic or philosophical analysis of the issues which will be raised. Instead they represent the opinions, convictions and prejudices of one person attempting, honestly, to assess the confusion of which he finds himself a part. No doubt they also give evidence of one who is continually out of step with those around him, and has come, wisely or unwisely, to believe in being out of step and to believe also in clinging to his own vision, however impractical or Utopian it is judged to be. None of this makes the opinions any the less or more correct or useful or valuable, but I hope in stating them bluntly and personally to provoke discussion on a number of related issues that move me somewhere in my stomach.

I find myself utterly bored and not a little troubled by a fairly current view among "Well-intentioned" Whites, to the effect that if we Whites only started to accommodate Black aspirations and eliminate "petty" apartheid, we would thereby eliminate Black hostility and the possibilities of further Soweto-type action. So profoundly patronizing an attitude can only lead to disillusionment and probably also to disaster in that it will inevitably provoke increased violence. The underlying assumptions it displays are roughly as follows — Blacks are basically good boys and girls: Blacks just want us to be nice to them: Blacks are not really bitter about South African history: and Blacks don't really want full and equal participation with Whites in political matters.

Take a walk through the main streets of Pietermaritzburg at five in the morning. Here, as in most cities, you will see the people of God making their way to work, having risen an hour or so earlier. Drive a little off the main road through Edendale, along the rough roads which twist and twirl up to hills that encircle Pietermaritzburg and you will see where these people have their homes and see their children filling buckets from a communal tap, to carry home for the needs of to-day.

When you have seen where the people of God rise in the morning you will stand privileged amongst the White community, because you will know how the contrast between where they are and where they work cannot escape them, and because you will hear the unsaid and unsayable things that are carried close, to work and home again. There is nothing comfortable to be heard — a gnawing need for redress, and dogged yearning for a new rising in a new morning.

What this experience teaches most directly is that we have missed the most obvious fact about South Africa, if we expect Blacks to be all-forgiving and obsequiously or generously to give the converted Whites a clean slate. In the final analysis the precise terms of change can only and will only be determined by the Blacks, regardless of a White change of attitude or position. And whatever the final terms are we must accept that they are not going to be in the least degree comfortable for us Whites. It is even quite possible that the boot will be squarely on the other foot, and that we in turn will be the victims of discrimination at least for some time. To brush aside these possibilities is both foolish and dishonest; we have to recognise that change is comfortable in neither concept nor practice, and that we have a major role to play in helping Whites to equip themselves personally so as to cope with the coming reality. The first strategy in fulfilling that paradoxically impossible task is to say it like it is and like it will become. Invariably saying it like it will become, includes some realistic comments about standards of living after change. For Whites this will have to mean drastically reduced standards and the sooner this is openly stated and recognised the sooner will we also be able to claim that we are squarely facing the African reality of poverty. We have to recognise in effect, that South Africa is a poor country and only appears wealthy in that our way of life ensures that a particular group gathers for itself a totally disproportionate slice of everything that is available. Pious talk by many Whites seems somehow to be underpinned with an expectation that their own levels of living will remain very much what they presently are. Rude awakening must follow. To prepare adequately for what is to happen in our lives at a mundance and domestic level we must think of living on a quarter of what we now have and rid ourselves of such automatic notions as the family car.

These observations do of course presuppose a system of economics other than that of the predominating capitalism of today. Such a presupposition is not unreasonable in that Blacks have been given no cause to believe in even the possibility of what some wealthy individuals (and perhaps also you, the reader) would regard as the reasonable face of capitalism. Whether socialism, African or otherwise, will necessarily give Blacks a fairer deal is open to debate, but essentially it is the Black option and we will have to live with it. Those Whites who feel the need to rush into a critical examination of the dangers of African Socialism should first take the family car on a five-minute jaunt on the by-roads of Edendale, with sun glasses preferably removed.

But having faced what the Black option is bound to be, it is perhaps pertinent to recognise that no political or economic system can guarantee what mankind generally seems to expect: a place to live with one's family in relative security, comfort and quiet. The level of transformation required in any society for these ideals to be adopted and fulfilled in practice, can only be described as religious. It can only be achieved where a people, or vast numbers of them, become committed to a life-style which embraces every individual and for such a phenomenon to occur would require an unprecedented conversion experience shared by thousands. For this reason, the required transformation, albeit religious, can not find its origin or its impetus in that major South African evil, the phenomenon of Christianity in the form of the various institutional Churches and mass-escapist movements.

What grounds are there for so vast a claim? Perhaps some of the following: an Anglican bishop's early morning radio pep-talk on Christianity as a highway code and guide to safe motoring; a second pep-talk on Christianity as an advanced Dale Carnegie Course; and on the morality of remembering people's names when they are introduced to one (how marvellously British and how profoundly episcopal); a Roman Catholic school which advertises in the White Parish of St. Mary's, Pietermaritzburg the religious obligation of Catholics to provide Catholic education for their children, with no such advertising at the Black parishes; which also refuse a Black applicant to Community Development without supporting the application; which hides behind the possibility of White parents withdrawing their sons as pupils on the day of integration but does not conduct a universal survey of parents (at most 315 couples) to ascertain the precise number of supposed withdrawals; which does not consult a publicly sympathetic M.E.C. in charge of Education; which does not ascertain how many Black (Coloured, Indian and African) parents might be prepared to pay full fees and which finally and triumphantly celebrates a hundred years of so called Christian education.

Not convinced? Examine the record of three Afrikaner Churches and of such flourishing movements as Underground Evangelism (smuggling Bibles into Russia) and the Christian League of South Africa (opposes violence — of Blacks only); heard of a pamphlet called "An Ideology for South Africa?" — this marvellous publication suggests that South Africa go out to missionize the world. This would lift the gross national product by a good number of Bibles!

There are yet more damning grounds. A new fundamentalism is spreading wildly and widely through the Christian community. Two inter-related characteristics typify this fundamentalism — the first being the Christianity-as-portable-collective-womb syndrome. This is evidenced when Christians are no longer able to cope with the paradoxes and honest doubts of creative faith, and retire into a formula-mumbling declaration of a hollow faith in Jesus as their personal Saviour (from life) and in the cross as an umbilical cord of safety and nurturing from the Divine Person. Safe in this retirement and surrounded by quotations from Paul (usually out of context) they pass judgement upon and pray at the sinners around them. All revolves for them in the magic word faith; there is no

understanding and even very little reading, of the Gospels, no willingness to confront the humanness of the man God-Jesus, whom they profess to follow and no openness to the mundane, even political consequences of Matthew 5:1-12 and 25: 31-46.

The second characteristic is a particularly tortured and unopen understanding of the charismatic experience. I am the last person to doubt that deeply personal experiences of renewal and of healing can overtake individuals unexpectedly. Indeed I would accept that such experiences are usually fundamental to growth to full personhood and participation in society. However, the common attitude of those who describe themselves as charismatic is one of self-righteous exclusiveness. They claim to have a new and exclusive relationship with the Divine — being born in the Spirit, or similarly baptised. In consequence, from their lofty spiritual peak they look down patronizingly on the rest of the human race. The Spirit is there to transport them on the wings of "Hallelujahs" and "Praise the Lords" into a cosy cocoon beyond social responsibility, out of all reach of any cry from the dispossessed, the hungry, the imprisoned. An example — a Pietermaritzburg Optician, who believes that the only reason why he has no trouble from the Security Police, while the writer has had some brushes with the brave men in blue, is that he, as a charismatic, has the Holy Spirit protecting him. Unfortunately, the gentleman has not yet explained the failure of the Holy Spirit to protect charismatics in certain communist countries, nor has he given any idea of what the Spirit has ever led him to, which could also have interested the Police.

The picture is not rosy. In general the Christians stand together in the new-found security of their collective insecurity; they have rendered themselves "safe from all experience, safe above all from life". The fatuous sense of morality which quakes at the naked human body, but cannot be moved by hunger and starvation, is the communal refuge offered by so many Sunday sermons. Christians are invited to indulge themselves in the tortuous enigmas of their own inadequacies, to moralize on dill and mint and pickle and above all encouraged to avoid any personal confrontation with the man Jesus of the Gospels and his way of living rather than his wretched death. The idea that Jesus' favourites were the poor, the dispossessed, the rejected, that he lived a freedom and responsibility beyond rules, that he called men to follow his way of life not to hallucinate on his death — these are forgotten or eradicated as violently as possible. Armed with predetermined and preconceived views on the nature of God, they avoid or argue away the paradox that the Christian has only one way of validly speaking in human terms about his God, and that is to recount the events of the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Inasmuch as the Christians refuse to embrace paradox, to accept that faith exists only in doubt, that despair is the beginning of hope or that silence alone describes the unknowable, they cast aside their calling and opt for mutual respectability and moronic conformity

The final evidence of the evil of the Christian institutions and of their total and committed participation in what they call the sinfulness of mankind, is the spectacle of the Christian stand on "Defence" and conscientious objection. We have the demonic parody of Christian responsibility in that the pastors of the Prince of Peace willingly serve

as Chaplains to men-at-arms, preaching Christ crucified to the perpetrators of modern crucifixion. It is not as though they divide themselves as pastors to both sides in the violent conflict, which would be scandalous enough but plainly the sympathy and interests of the Christian church as property-owner and spiritual haven of the rich rather than servant of the poor, lie squarely in the White status quo. The "Defence" chaplaincies are the Church's statement of position for any possible polarization in Southern Africa.

What is made of the Christian calling to be prophets and peace-makers? Where is the prophesying to the Armed Forces? Where is the bugle-call to peace? Is the God of the Christians truly more concerned about what we do with our genitals than what we do with our guns? Where are the Christian peace-makers, pacifists, pastors committed to peace? Who will make room for the Christian conscience which believes that the Prince of Peace had no time for violence, or that if he did use it he used it only to defend the poor and rid them of those who robbed and exploited them? — perhaps a Bishop or two — who in so doing alienates practically the entire White Christian community. It is the duty of the Christian to make peace, perhaps to build bridges, dams, hospitals, clinics, schools, roads, certainly to build solidarity and understanding; there is no place for war or "Defence" or other such misnomers in the Christian perspective (unless of course someone can oblige us with a suitable quotation from Paul). Patriotism is a false god if it is understood to mean serving one's country from the safe end of a rifle, and it would appear that many have turned to worship at this new shrine.

But the great Christian cop-out does not end with military peace-making. It goes on to claim that it is illegal to speak out against the prevailing notions of "Defence" and seeks to tie up the notion of legality with that of justice. There are two fallacies in this view - firstly Jesus himself set the Christian precedent for attitudes to law, and the Gospels are unequivocally clear on his deliberate transgressions. Presumably there is some point for Christians to be inferred from these events. Secondly legality and justice are not synonymous. So august a body as the South African judiciary has drawn attention to this distinction and has gone so far as to define its own role as to give rulings only

on the legality or otherwise of actions, without reference to the question of justice.

In consequence, the Christian who attempts to hide behind the law and allow it rather than himself to face the accusing finger of fate or history, may do so only to the extent that he is prepared to disregard justice, and the example of his man-God. Which of course leaves most Christians free to hide behind the law. But what of the judiciary? — It never ceases to amaze me that despite their own rulings, their formal title is preserved as Mr Justice X, instead of Mr Legal Referee X or Mr Legality X, both of which alternatives recall a clearer definition of their function. Society raises expectations which can never be satisfied in the courts by preserving an outdated title.

Perhaps these expectations ought to be satisfied in the courts. The duty of the courts to bind themselves to the question of legality finds its origin in the view that the Parliament represents the will of the people and that the courts are the arbiters on what the will of the people shall be deemed to be. Inasmuch as the South African Parliament does not reflect the will of the people, but only that of the White minority, the courts could reasonably find that they were still bound to the cardinal principle of declaring what the will of the people might be. When the courts take this role to themselves, the return to the present title of Justice might be required. Until that time we can however, continue to expect Christians to cling to the law, as the justification for behaviour and attitudes which the Gospels bring into question.

In conclusion allow me to add that my remarks have not been merely cheap cracks at groups to whom I am considerably opposed. As it happens I am a committed and practising member of the Christian denomination which came under most direct criticism here. It is simply about time that White Christians began realizing that the Gospel's "first shall be last and last shall be first" might in fact mean safe, warm, well-fed, church-going Christians are in for a surprise. For this reason I have used the phrase people of God to describe those who are rejected and whom life passes by. The Gospels are quite clear evidence that it was the rejected of society who were Jesus' special favourites. It is in this realisation alone that the Christian Church can rediscover its proper calling. •