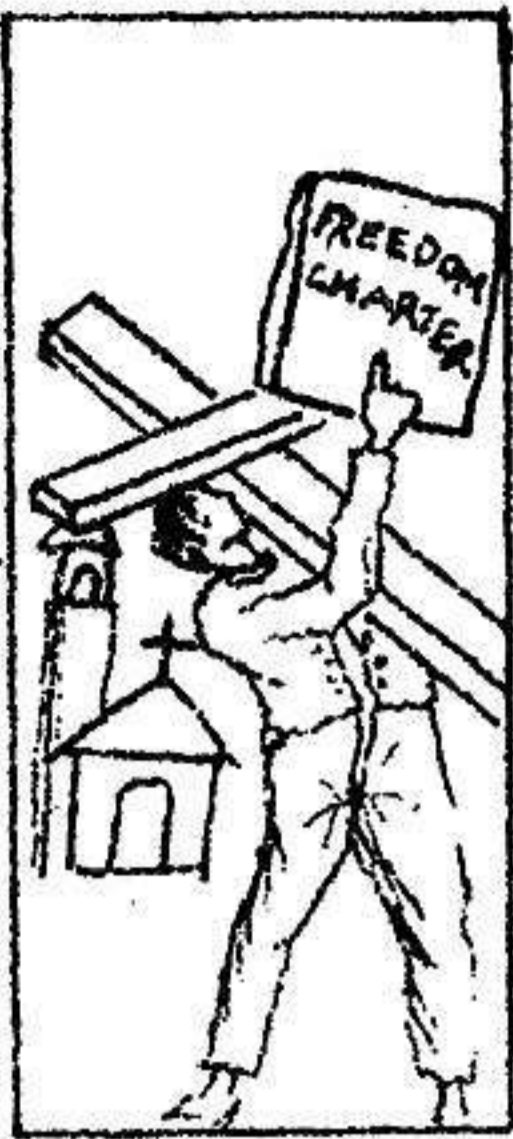


THE BLACK CHURCH

AND

LIBERATION



-Peter Lerumo

Religious ideas had an important impact and ideological content in the anti-colonial struggle in Africa at the close of the 19th century. The African independent churches' movement has been a religious protest with a political charge. This manifested itself in Kenya with the Kikuyu religious movement, in the Congo with the African Prophets' Movement and in South Africa in Ethiopianism. Nationalism found expression in the breaking away from the white dominated churches rigged with racism and discrimination and the establishment of independent African churches representative of their interests.

This affected most mission churches and resulted in the formation of indigenous churches and the incorporation of the Ethiopian church into the all-black African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in America founded on common grounds. Occurring at a time when South Africa was undergoing rapid industrialisation (1870-1925) giving rise to a urban black proletariat, the idea of a common church excluding racists had a wide appeal. A clear connection between church affiliation and the position of the black man existed. While the leaders of the earlier splits were ordained ministers, the independent churches of the Zionist type attracted the less educated and poorest. The Shembe church in Zululand was formed by Isaiah Shembe, son of a farm labourer.

The Role of Church Leaders

Many church leaders have played an important role in our people's struggle for national liberation. John Dube, a leader in the Congregational church became the first president of the African National Congress in 1912. Charlotte Maxeke a leader in the AME church founded the ANC Women's League. Z.R. Mahabane a methodist minister was the ANC President in the 40s. He pressed for larger participation of Africans in the Methodist church and in 1960-61 served on the continuation committees of the All-in-conference of African leaders and later the Pietermaritzburg Conference. Rev. N. Tantsi, a minister of the AME church was a leader of the ANC in the Transvaal. Banned in 1953 for his political activities, he later served on the committee of the All-in-conference of African leaders in 1960. The popular song "Mayibuye" is his composition. Rev. J. Calata, Secretary-General of the African National Congress between 1939 and 1949 and Rev. S. Tema, of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) also played significant roles. All these distinguished church leaders played a role in the formation and activities of the quasi-political Interdenominational African Ministers' Federation (IDAMF) as well as the Bloemfontein Conference to discuss the Tomlinson report. Chief Albert Luthuli, the last President of the ANC inside the country before its proscription was a practising Christian and a leading churchman. However as the secular movement developed these churches separated more and more from them.

Government's Response

The period under discussion saw increased repression coupled with tighter control over churches. All churches had to register so that their policies could be streamlined to conform to government policy. Their doctrines were under continuous scrutiny to ensure that it did not enhance political ideas. Strict control was exercised over the building of churches and educational institutions like the Wilberforce Institute in the Transvaal, founded by the AME church were taken over by the government.

The Native Land Act which led to the uprooting of black Christians adversely affected the church. The Bantu Authorities Act made provision for the ethnic division of townships which made it difficult for a minister to serve a congregation whose membership happens to be of a different ethnic group.

Although the church fought on its nationalist fervour waned leading to most independent churches becoming apolitical, others succumbing to government pressure to the point of open collaboration although some church leaders continued to make individual contributions.

Deviation from Ideals

The AME formed in the 1870s by former slave, Richard Allen on the noble principle of equality and the brotherhood of man was brought to South Africa through Charlotte Maxeke and Reverends M. Mokone and J. Tantsi. The activities of some church leaders have shown a deviation from the ideals of the church.

In 1962 Bishop Francis H. Gow, the first indigenous bishop of the church accepted the chairmanship of the dummy Coloured Affairs Council, forerunner to the Coloured Representative Council (CRC). When District Six fell prey to the Group Areas Act in 1966, the church willingly sold its property to the government while the people resisted this injustice.

In 1968 when Gardener, Minister of Interior, called on churches to sever links with overseas churches, a similar move was uncovered inside the church spearheaded by one, Benjamin Rajuli, known collaborator who had served in the Transkei 'government' and was candidate for the '71 UBC elections. Their call for the appointment for indigenous bishops was aimed at dividing the church on the lines of the Bantustans with a Xhosa AME church, Sotho AME church Coloured AME church, etc.

In 1970 at the church's 75th anniversary in Cape Town, one Gaur, an administrator of apartheid was given prominence as an invited guest in his capacity as Commissioner of Coloured Affairs together with D.J. Vorster, moderator of the NGK and a known advocate of racial segregation, besides being the brother of the then fascist Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster. This was a clear violation of the principle on which the church is based.

In 1979 members of the church came out in open confrontation against Bishop Ming for his refusal to come out directly against government policy in condemning apartheid. Half the detainees in Namibia are AME members but he has kept quiet while other churches have protested when their members are detained.

The Zion Christian Church (ZCC) serves as an example of how the independent churches are being used to perpetrate government policy. At its recent conference, Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane, addressing more than two million followers said that it

was not for the individual to judge whether the law was just or unjust. He said the church fully supported homeland governments, chiefs and local authorities. This conference was attended by racist Minister of Co-operation and Development, Piet Koornhof (Post 9th April, 1980). There are other churches whose doctrine does not allow its members to advocate political ideas but the reality of their daily existence forces them to involve themselves in the fight against social injustice.

Black Consciousness

The Black Consciousness Movement has had some influence on the black church. In the late 60s we saw the emergence within the church of Black Theology interpreting religion in the light of the experience of the black man with the aim of uniting him in a common struggle against racial injustice. The University Christian Movement (UCM) 1967 stimulated this development. Dr A. Soesan of the NG mission church is a typical example. Taking exception to being called a 'Coloured', he has been preaching that there is no theological basis for racial discrimination or racist separation. The Interdenominational African Ministers' Association of South Africa also closely linked itself with black consciousness and called on the government to scrap separate development.

A Black Priests' Association was recently formed with the aim of uniting all churches in South Africa. Their conference was attended by the Azanian Students' Organisation (AZASO), Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). At a recent conference, the idea to form a militant black confessing church as an alternative to the existing denominational churches were discussed and churches were warned to purge the church of racism before the blacks go it alone. The Independent African Churches' Association (IACA) became closely aligned to black consciousness and co-operated with the now banned Christian Institute. However, black consciousness also has its limitations in that it appeals to the radical youth movement and seminaries and does not enjoy support amongst the broad masses and lacks a clear ideological line.

New Upsurge

By nature of the South African society, the majority in all church denominations except those which are exclusively

white, are of the oppressed and the present tempo of development of events and mass actions influences the church to take a more committed stand towards liberation.

The Lutheran Bishop, Manas Buthelezi, recently called on churches to stop emulating the government policy of separate development. He attacked the church for building churches in black areas and installing black priests just like the government dictates e.g. installing Sotho priests in so-called Sotho areas. Bishop Buthelezi called on the living standards of blacks not to be compared to blacks in other parts of Africa but to white South Africans. The recent 'moves' for change, he said, amount to adjustments within the framework of government policy and the constellation of states in a move to gain international recognition for the Bantustans and to neutralise the liberation movement by creating buffer zones. The Bishop also came out in support of students' action in 1976 and served on the Black Parents' Association (BPA) during the uprisings.

Various black church leaders have also come out in support of actions of our masses like industrial strikes and boycotts as the Fattis and Monis case indicates as well as the arrest of Rev. John Thorne, a congregational minister and former South African Council of Churches' Secretary-General, for his support for the present school boycott. In certain areas where a church is traditionally strong the anti-government stand of its leadership has an influence on general attitudes towards the government. This can be clearly seen by the massive support which the Labour Party enjoys in the Eastern Cape, where Rev. A Hendricks, a Labour Party leader, is a leading clergyman.

The Moravian church which has a strong following among the Coloured community with complete control over rural Cape towns (former mission stations) like Genedendal, Elin, Mamre, etc., has come out strongly against government policy as opposed to its previous collaborationist role which stemmed from its missionary character. During 1974, the Moravian church in Johannesburg came out against forced registration of Coloured voters for the pending CRC elections of 1975. Rev. C. Wessels is a prominent Moravian minister who was detained for his involvement in the 1976 Uprisings in Port Elizabeth and is also involved in the Eastern Cape Council of Churches. In the Catholic church, the hierarchy excludes blacks almost completely and this led to a fight within the church against this inequality. Outside the church the fight is limited to calls for its schools and seminaries to be desegregated.

The Methodist church recently called for the scrapping of certain discriminatory laws and is in the forefront in the fight for justified conscientious objection. A dramatic confrontation is taking place between the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) and its three daughter churches - the NGK in Africa and the Indian NG Kerk. These churches threaten to sever their ties with the white NGK for its continued support for government policy.

In one of its publications, the Presbyterian church speaks of the NGK as the Nationalist Party at prayer. It likened the 'Christians' in the NGK to the 'Christians' in Germany who supported Nazism. The section of the church openly identifying itself with liberation and questioning the legibility of government functionaries holding office within the church can be seen among other things in the church's disapproval of the security police members holding office in the church and of communicants who show racial prejudice.

The Church's Stand

The stand taken by the SACC against racist policy is a commendable one. Recently in a response to the false allegations made by Botha that the SACC is promoting unrest inside the country Bishop Tutu said: "What we are doing is to fight for a just, open and non-racial society where everyone counts". This realisation by the SACC of the Freedom Charter as the legitimate demands of the oppressed most of whom are church members is proof that the Charter can be reconciled with the Christian principle of the "brotherhood of man".

The government, reeling under the attack from the church is not a passive onlooker. Recently it was revealed that the creation of the Christian League of South Africa (CLSA) as a counter to the 'politically motivated' SACC was financed with government funds. Ds. Buti recently attacked the strategy of the white NGK of using its tremendous financial power to influence and dominate outspoken black ministers who reject apartheid. These ministers and their congregations are being threatened that the NGK will withdraw its financial support unless they toe the line. It is against this background that the recent attack on the SACC by the Independent Churches of South Africa (ICSA) should be seen. The negative trend within the church which shows itself from time to time is inevitable because of the ups and downs of social development. Vaccillations in response to enemy manoeuvres lead to certain sections laying emphasis on petty concessions at the

expenditure of the struggle. The injection of new ideas, which channel the church into the struggle and neutralise the petty-bourgeois tendencies which manifest themselves in the acceptance of hand-outs to satisfy personal interests, is needed.

Continued from page 2

declared THE YEAR OF THE WORKER to mark the 25th anniversary of its foundation on March 5, 1955, and even more so when all progressive mankind is joining the working class of our country in taking stock of the road traversed by their vanguard party - the South African Communist Party, a working class organisation which since its creation on July 29, 1921, through its committed participation in our struggle for national liberation has proved itself to be an indispensable component of our liberation movement.

At this hour of our liberation struggle, in this great Year of the Freedom Charter, when the fascist rulers are frantically doing everything they can think of to preserve the abhorrent apartheid system, the workers must increasingly throw in their lot with the rest of the oppressed people. The question of how long the apartheid system will survive depends ultimately on the workers whose labour is the source of the huge profits which enable the Pretoria racists to maintain their repressive machinery, to pay their personnel, to buy additional arms etc. But the workers alone cannot fulfil this gigantic mission. They must join hands with the rest of the oppressed masses - peasants, students, progressive intellectuals, believers and non-believers - and the increasing number of democratic whites. The daring actions of our people's army, Umkhonto we Sizwe, must always be backed with mass political action involving all the cross-sections of our population such as the current strikes, demand for an unconditional release of Comrade Nelson Mandela, the militant opposition to all apartheid practices like Bantu Education. The racists must not be given any chance to rest.

This is above all a challenge to us combatants of MK to improve our discipline and strengthen our conviction so that together with our entire people led by the African National Congress we can advance to final victory saying:

FORWARD TO A PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT!