

Religion and The Struggle Against Apartheid

Introduction

Comrade President O.R. Tambo, Cde Chairperson, comrades at this important and historical in-house Seminar. The theme of my essay is Religion and the struggle Against Apartheid. But, due to lack of relevant data, I have decided to speak on a specific religion, i.e. Christianity. This, I hope will be argued without distorting the essence of our theme.

The following historical facts have also influenced my approach to this paper:

i) Christianity is the religion of the majority in South Africa - both black and white. The estimated total figure of Christians i.e. 22 544 820 (African Communist 107 p119).

ii) Secondly, it is the root-cause of the most evil that has torn apart our beautiful country, South Africa, and the world over

iii) Thirdly, the majority of the ANC founding fathers are the products of the missionary schools.

iv) Lastly, the majority of religious patriots in South Africa today are found within the Church.

Bird's Eye View of the History of the ANC:

Dear comrades, let me start by quoting from Charles Villa Vinencio's book a statement made by C.E.B. Cranfield in his essay, "The Christian's political Responsibility According to the New Testament":

"It is necessary for the Christian not only to submit to the government of the day, but in certain circumstances and within certain limits to join in military action at the command of the government. On the other hand, in certain extreme circumstances it may be necessary to engage in armed rebellion in order to overthrow a government that is intolerably unjust and replace it."

The inhuman apartheid system in South Africa is the aftermath of colonialism and racism, which was itself the product of economic and social forces prevailing in the Western world. The white/European theology of the Churches tended to reflect and reinforce the policies and practices of the emerging apartheid regime to such an extent that the oppressors claim that apartheid is justified to defend and advance Christian civilization and cultural values.

Out of this unholy marriage of Church and state, many Christians of conscience and commitment to humanity arose to engage in Liberation struggle and founded the ANC in 1912. Some of these great patriots were Rev. John L. Dube (1912-1917) Chief Albert Luthuli (1917-19), Rev. Z.K. Mahabane (1924-27; 1937-40); Rev. J.T. Gumede (1927-1930) the first, second, third and fourth ANC President's respectively.

As comrade President O.R. Tambo said:

"The ANC has had a long history of association with the church. Our founders were church men and women. Throughout our 75 years that link has never been broken" (World Council of Churches Conference in Lusaka, May 1987)

However, it should be noted that the majority of Christians seemed not to be bothered by the injustice which enveloped the oppressed masses of South Africa. The Church as an institution, neither spoke about it either in her newspapers or journals.

The late 1960s, the 70s and 80s brought about a different political story - a new positive political awareness emerged. This is not only of individual clergymen but of most religious sectors and congregations. Church organisations such as the South African Council of Churches have become increasingly radical in the face of the state violence of oppression and repression, and have demonstrated their solidarity and support for the ANC and other democratic organisations such as the UDF, SAYCO, COSATU, etc.

Destructive/counter productive ideas about God, Religion and politics have changed in the past generation, though some still argue that religion is by nature a legitimacy of the ruling class ideology. However, true South African patriots perceive and accept it as a spiritual resource for revolutionary change. Nonetheless, whatever ideas people have about religion it is an indisputable fact that it is shifting from passivity to complicity. It is no longer supremely indifferent and detached but is irrevocably committed to the liberation of the oppressed in South Africa. It identifies with the oppressed masses in a spirit of solidarity and compassion and has declared apartheid a heresy - a crime against humanity - which has to be fought at all costs.

The Church and its Role:

According to Janes it came (speaking the Truth, p.115), the Church is that community of people called into being by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Put differently, the church is a community on a divine march.

She is the chosen one; people set apart by God for God. Her ultimate mission centres around the Kingdom of God and she is the ultimate boat from where the Liberating Gospel shall be rightly proclaimed.

Revolutionary disciples are drawn together, united in, and , by the Holy spirit, God commands them to challenge the evils of this world and turn it upside down. He commands them to rinse now in His majesty and glory and crush the wicked where they stand.

As the Kairos Document of 1985 put it:

"Christians are supposed to oppose, confront and reject the devil and not try to sup with the devil" (The Kairos Document p.12)

"Christians are not called to preserve 'peace' and 'unity' at all costs, especially at the cost of truth and justice. Our calling, as disciples of Jesus, is, to promote truth, justice and life for all human beings at all costs, even at the cost of creating conflict, division and dissension. This is a Biblical theology of direct confrontation with the forces of evil rather than a theology of reconciliation with sin and the devil." (The Kairos Document p.13)

"True justice, God's justice, demands a radical change of structures. This can only come from below, from the oppressed themselves. God will bring about change through the oppressed, as he did through the oppressed Hebrew slaves in Egypt. God does not bring this justice through reforms introduced by the Pharaohs of this world." (The Kairos Document p.14)

The Reverend David R.J. Penney correctly says:

"Church theology should be addressed to the oppressed. The churches should demand that they stand up for their 'rights', based on God's righteousness, and engage in the liberation struggle against their oppressors. It is their christian duty, as it is ours, to work for justice and to change the unjust structures and uproot the evil system of apartheid."

In highlighting further the role of the church, let me quote the statement made by the Afrikaner priest, Rev. C.D. Brink to the Volkskongres in 1947:

"The aim of the church is to bring about social justice. Justice must be done to the poor and oppressed, and if the present system does not serve this purpose, the public conscience must be roused to demand another. If the church does not exert itself for justice in society and together with the help she can offer also be prepared to serve as a champion for the cause of the poor, others will do it. The poor have their right today. I do not ask for your charity, but I ask to be given an opportunity to live a life of a human happily."

Comrades, it is a God-given task of the Church to stand up unshaken and unyielding in challenging the injustice perpetuated by the oppressive racist regime. In failing to do this it would have failed in its divine mission. The church in South Africa is shared by both the oppressor and the oppressed, and thus her theology is bound to be moulded accordingly. The oppressor has always used religion as a viable tool to keep blacks in subjugation. Such religion is a total negation of the society practised by Jesus and as Comrade Cendric Mayson puts it:

"It leads to the civilizing of injustice, the respectabilising of violence and cruelty and moralising of immorality (African Communist 110, p.60)

Comrade Mayson further charges that oppressors believe that God rewards the righteous with riches and has appointed them to preserve civilization by violent means and the oppressed succumb to the opiate of patient endurance for the good of their souls. Such religion is unquestionable corrupt and false and the people must reject it and this rejection as comrade Mayson sees it, it is the only route to liberation through which to find a saving faith in what Jerns called:

"The truth which makes you free."

Comrades, it is the first and foremost responsibility of the church to destroy any theological basis of apartheid and oppression. It must affirm its support for such statements as the United Nation Universal Declaration of Human and People's Rights. Most nations have declared as basic and essential to human flourishing the following four categories of Human Rights:

1. Moral Rights

These protect the life, liberty and security of the person. They affirm basic freedom of conscience and religion, of movement within states and out of them. They protect people from discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion.

2. Civil Rights: These concern membership within particular states and nations. They affirm the rights of all to participate in government, freedom of association, democratic rights, freedom for cultural and scientific pursuits, the right to nationality and ownership of land and property.

3 Legal Rights:

These protect people before the law of their country. They concern equality before the law, recognition by the law, protection against arbitrary arrest, detention, and exile. They affirm the innocence of the person until proven guilty by due fair and impartial procedures of law. They offer protection of personal and family privacy.

4. Social and Economic Rights:

They affirm the right of everyone to social security, to work and liberty of choice in employment, to an adequate standard of living, adequate shelter and to educational provision.

Comrade Chairperson, comrades, any government that violates the above-mentioned basic Human Rights, as does the Racist Pretoria Regime, has to be destroyed from below. It is the church's major duty to speak up against such violation and to destroy racism, not only in South Africa, but in all four corners of the earth where it exists. However, any eloquent statements with no practical action backing are futile an exercise.

The Kairos Document: Concerned Christians in South Africa believe that Jesus is important for the advancement of our National Democratic struggle and thus, they put forward his liberating message as it is i.e. "only the working people in the struggle for life will prove or disprove that the Kingdom of God is Good News for the poor" (Pixley).

Christians in South Africa are deeply concerned about the present socio-political and economic crises in the country, and their concern they produced, in 1985, a document called "A challenge to the church" but which soon became universally known by its subtitle: "The Kairos Document". Kairos comes from a Biblical Greek word which means that the moment of truth has arrived.

This document is a christian biblical and theological comment on the deepened crisis in South Africa today. It begins by denouncing state theology which stipulates that christians are bound to obey secular rulers, that law and order are sacramental even if that so-called law is unjust and the order is evil. The document further states that the god that the racist regime promotes is false and is anti-Christ. Therefore, the concerned Christians in South Africa challenge christians in South Africa and the world over to "re-examine their belief, which has become tainted and corrupted by a state theology and Church theology and which believes and hides the true Prophetic Theology." (Rev. David R.J. Penney).

Challenge to Action:

It is a well known fact (Biblically) that God always sides with the down-trodden, the oppressed, the outcasts. It is, therefore imperative that those who collaborate with the oppressor or those who are neutral to join the winning side - that of the down-trodden.

The present political situation in South Africa demands the Church to move to a ministry of participation in the struggle for liberation it can only do this by supporting and encouraging the campaigns and actions of the democratic people. As the report of the South African Council of Churches National Conference of 1986 states:

i) The activities of the Church, like Sunday services, baptism, funerals, etc. must all be reshaped to promote the liberating mission of God in the present political crisis in South Africa.

ii) The church should also make its contribution to the struggle by having special programmes, projects and campaigns, and this should be done in consultation with progressive political organisations.

iii) The Church should not collaborate with tyranny and oppression. It should encourage its members to pray and work for a change of government. It is also its duty to provide moral guidance, by helping people to understand their rights and duties, especially the moral duty to resist tyranny and to struggle for a just society.

Recently, we have witnessed how prominent Church figures, led by Arch-Bishop Tutu defied the racist order to disperse when protesting against the recently imposed restrictions on UDF, SAYCO, CCSATU and other democratic movements. This is surely a sign of hope, that the Church as an institution is gradually identifying herself with the oppressed majority. In other words, she has become a vital political force of influencing, the constitutional guidelines of a free, non-racial undivided and democratic South Africa.

Conclusion

Comrade Chairperson, Comrades, throughout my paper I have tried to present what I thought to be vivid picture of a Church in South Africa - a good and bad elements. The bright side of her surely overshadows all her adulterous years. As revolutionaries, we have to be optimistic. We do derive strategies from the past, but this has to be done without losing our political perspective.

Comrade chairperson, comrades, the part and the present political involvement of the Church is a guarantee of the bright future in a free, non-racial and democratic South Africa. It has become an important component of our National Democratic struggle. Hence any future constitutional guidelines of worship. This is quite explicit in the Freedom Charter.

The Freedom Charter is committed to religious freedom, and this is an act of faith. The ANC symbol depicts a wheel moving towards freedom and justice. The four spokes in the wheel represent the main grouping in South Africa, whites, blacks, Coloureds and Indians. So, the ANC movement "is firmly based on a fully human, inter-faith, Christian document - it is inclusive, not exclusive. It is the power of life to all the people." (Rev. David R.J. Penney).

I will close by posing a question which I feel is not answered in the Freedom Charter and which I feel should be answered and considered in any future constitutional guidelines:

Will our future democratic Government budget for the Church - for the reconstruction of church buildings which have been left in ruins due to the racist apartheid system in places like District Six? (Read I saiah 61: 1-4)

By Rev. Gqiba F.F.

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