by Edmund Hill

GOD IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CHALLENGE OF THE GOSPEL,

ALBERT NOLAN
David Philip. C.T. 1988

Albert Nolan says in his preface that his book could be described as evangelisation rather than as theology. As theology it has certain weaknesses; as evangelisation it is magnificent. The blurb says the book is clear, simple, straightforward, prophetic and thoroughly South African. This is true; what I regard as some theological weaknesses are perhaps the shadow side of these qualities. Let us begin with just two of them, in order to end with the very considerable virtues or strengths of the book.

The weakness that shadows straightforward simplicity is oversimplification, and there are several instances of this. Take power, for instance. Albert, thinking of the battle cry **Amandla awethu,** says power is a good thing, and criticises Lord Acton's famous dictim, "All power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely" as being "not true". This is oversimplification, and misses the point of what Lord Acton said — misses, that is to say, the very necessary warning contained in it. It is also to be unjust to Lord Acton: what he more precisely said, or wrote, was "All power **tends** to corrupt, and absolute power **tends** to corrupt absolutely". This most certainly is true. The very system Albert is struggling against illustrates the truth of it; and it disturbs me rather to see opponents of the system brushing it aside.

Then, "The Bible says . . ." This is a frequent refrain in the book. Now it is legitimate to get a simple message out of the Bible, the message of the gospel, of God being on the side of the poor and oppressed, for example, which Albert does with great effect in his work of evangelisation. But he knows as well as I do that if we change his expression to "The Bible sings . . ." (more African, don't you think?), the Bible does **not** sing in unison with one voice, like plainchant, but in extremely complex harmonies, which contain dynamically, like all great music, many temporary discords, which are only resolved as the song or symphony proceeds, and finally comes to its conclusion.

When he comes to these discords, things the Bible says which don't immediately harmonise with the central message he reads from the Bible, Albert tends either to ignore or dismiss them, instead of trying to resolve them into a final enrichment of the message. I think what he says about sin and suffering (taken together) is to some extent oversimplified in this way; but here I will only discuss his treatment of the apocalyptic eschatology to be found in the Bible. "The salvation preached by Jesus," he says, "was clearly not apocalyptic" (p. 131). But is this so clear? The very opposite was clear as daylight to another Albert, Schweitzer, at the turn of the century, who overthrew the "ethical Jesus" of 19th century liberal theologians by pointing out how very apocalyptic Jesus' message was.

Of course, there have been great developments in biblical criticism since Schweitzer wrote; but while they have indeed greatly modified **his** over-simplified position, I think it would be unwise to assume that they have simply demolished it. In almost totally jettisoning the apocalyptic streak in the gospel of Jesus which Albert Schweitzer highlighted, isn't Albert Nolan in danger of returning to another version of the 19th century's liberal ethical Jesus?

In any case, I suggest he doesn't pay enough attention to what I would call the practical, here-and-now evangelical value and force of apocalyptic and associated ideas, especially of the idea of and hope in the resurrection of the dead. Because that is the central Christian doctrine (and good news) with which apocalyptic, end-of-the-world eschatology is necessarily connected. It was that, among other things, that inspired the Maccabees in their struggle — not so very different in its aims from the struggle in South Africa today. Albert and the theological "lobby" he represents have, in my opinion, succumbed far too easily to the hackneyed sneer of "pie in the sky when you die". Instead of submitting it to some stringent analysis and tossing it back at the sneerers with nobs on, they just curl up under it, and say "We mustn't talk about the next life or the end of the world, or the resurrection, or anything like that; it's pie in the sky, escapism".

But my point is, it need'nt be escapism. It wasn't for the Maccabees, it wasn't for Jesus or the first Christians — or subsequent Christians (for all its faults, anything less

escapist than mediaeval Christianity is hard to imagine) — why should it be so for us? And anyway, Albert mentions the enormous, and proper, importance of funerals in the struggle. Important for the survivors, of course, those conducting the funerals; but not also for the subjects of them in their coffins? **Hamba kahle,** he quotes; where to? Those committed to the struggle are not afraid to die, he says, all those young people, those boys and girls. Why not? isn't the hope of resurrection a good, Christian, gospel answer? Albert writes at length, and well, about salvation from sin and its structures, and oppression, and suffering; but very little, if at all, about salvation from death.

Another weakness, perhaps the shadow side of clarity, but clearly related to oversimplification, is collaboration in the debasement of language — and this is potentially even more serious. As George Orwell said, and illustrated in **1984,** this is often done deliberately by what in this book of Albert's is called "the system" — the establishment. Orwell calls it "newspeak", and in the 40 years since he wrote the book there have been no more seasoned and cynical practitioners of newspeak than the South African government and its agencies — precisely "the system".

So it is depressing to find the staunch opponents of the system unthinkingly aiding and abetting it in thus debasing language, in thus rubbishing good, worthy, valuable words (like "liberal" and "moderate", the two I will glance at here), and giving a false value to bad, unworthy words (like "extremism", not to mention "violence"). Let's start with "liberal", a lovely word, connected of course with liberation and liberality, thus a word connoting freedom and generosity. First it is sneered and jeered at by the reactionaries of the system as "sickly, sentimental liberalism". Then the anti-system revolutionaries heap upon it an opposite contempt. Result — generosity and genuine freedom cease to be values uphed with any conviction in either wing of this polarised society.

Albert, it is true, doesn't attack "liberal" directly — it's hardly there any more to be attacked. But liberalism has fallen between the two stools of opposite extremisms, and extremism is something Albert does appear to be consciously promoting by rejecting the word "moderate". Whereas "liberal" has been vilified almost out of existence by both extremes, "moderate" has been cynically hijacked by the system for application to its more harmless critics like M. G. Buthelezi, and perhaps the Labour Party and the PFP. And what galls me is that this hijacking is condoned, indeed backed up, by committed opponents of the system like Albert.

It's naive, it's both politically and theologically inept, to let the Buthelezi's and Inkatha's of this world get away with the label "moderate"; it yields them a very big propaganda victory, and it forfeits valuable support from friends outside — bystanders like me, listening in to this conversation, as Albert puts it in his preface — who are innocently unfamiliar with the squalid intricacies of South African newspeak. People like Walter Wink, whom Albert rather unfairly, if gently, criticises for calling his book **Jesus' Third Way,** because this fails to take into account one of the booby-traps of this newspeak. Instead of yielding the system the use of the word "moderate" without a fight — and it's a **good** word, I repeat, like "modest" and "simple", and "sober" and "reasonable" and "gentle" — why not roundly deny the right of the system and its demi-critics to appropriate it to themselves? Why not claim it for the struggle?

Moderation is not true of the Bible, says Albert (p. 199). Well, that is a sweeping generalisation. I'm willing to bet it has its place somewhere in the Wisdom of literature. It's an Aristotelian, not a gospel value, he continues, and proves it by remarking that love is not meant to be moderate. Oversimplification again, and rather dangerous binary, either/or thinking. I'm sure Albert rejects that "either Marxist or Christian" mode of thinking that seems to hold Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation in its grip. Why then "either Aristotle or the gospel"? And if love is not to be moderated (there can't be too much love), love and its **altera ego** wisdom surely have the task of moderating other drives, emotions, impulses and appetites — anger, for example, which Albert very rightly says has its proper place in the struggle, or the use of power (to say nothing of pleasure). Anger and power, like pleasure, are in their place good. But there can most certainly be too much anger and power — and pleasure — and even if Jesus, or the Bible, doesn't actualy say so (after all, he wasn't and isn't the ethical Jesus of the 19th century), I would be extremely (not just moderately) surprised to learn that he actually denied it.

But, as Albert says, the book is not primarily theology, but evangelisation. And what splendid evangelisation it is! It really does call the active or passive supporters of the system to repentance, to **metanoia;** it really does, most convincingly, promise forgiveness, i.e. salvation from guilt, to all and any who do repent, and thus renounce the system, and all its works, and all its pomps.

It presents the struggle in a way that will certainly open the eyes of those who know it not, whether because they have been within the system or because, like me, they are outsiders, looking on. For all that we mustn't use the word "non-violent", or the expression "third way", or the word "moderate" (newspeak), Albert shows us that the struggle, in the intensity of the commitment of those involved, is more a matter of singing and dancing and expressing one's human worth, and one's solidarity with fellow strugglers and sufferers, than of violent bombings and necklacings (these he unequivocally rejects as untrue to the genuine spirit of the struggle — just like Archbishop Tutu). Thus it is, in fact, a moderate third way between the opposing extremes of out-and-out violence.

What Albert says about God being present in the thick of the struggle, about God being crucified by the system with those who suffer extremely (**not** moderately — there is certainly nothing moderate about the system's brutality) is powerful and moving. But it is the message, the prophecy, of hope that he reads in the signs of the South African times, which really makes the true greatness of this book. It is a great book; for all its weaknesses, it is a great Christian book, a challenge indeed to the Church and its members in South Africa, and it's the light of joyful, and thoroughly intelligent, hope shining out of it that makes it so.

As an outsider, a bystander from the older, more world-weary, more sceptical tradition of Europe, I'm a little worried that Albert has left his flanks and rear open and rather defenceless against the inroads of disappointment or disillusionment to come — to come precisely with victory and success. But no doubt he would fairly reply that evangelisation, and contextual theology, is concerned with the situation **now.** Let other readers of other signs of other times produce an appropriate interpretation, an appropriate tone of the gospel for the future. This is not a book for the future — well it may be, of course, but that is not its intention; it is a book for **now.**□