

# To be a Pilgrim

**Beyers Naude: Pilgrimage of Faith**, by Colleen Ryan  
(David Philip, R29,95)

The main questions which most readers will bring to a biography of Beyers Naudé are fairly simple: what happened? and how did it happen? Beyers Naudé is perhaps the outstanding current example of an Afrikaner who has changed, who has transformed himself. From having been an almost unquestioning member of the volk, an orthodox NGK predikant and a member of the Broederbond destined for higher things, he has been through a long, elaborate and often painful series of shifts and changes which have culminated, this year, in his being chosen (rather to his surprise, it seems) as a member of the ANC negotiating team at the Groote Schuur talks in April.

Let us consider Beyers Naudé in his crucial formative years, as an arts and theological student at Stellenbosch in the 1930s. What does Colleen Ryan, in her absorbing biography, tell us of her protagonist at this time? He was regarded as something of a leader (he had periods as head of his residence, president of the SRC and chairman of the **Berg en Toer Klub**), but he was not in any notable sense an "intellectual". Indeed he was partly bored by his theological studies, perhaps justifiably. His most interesting characteristic seems to have been a certain openness, a willingness to ask questions:

"I was questioning all the time. I wanted a justification and an explanation for whatever stand I took. But it was not a very probing, critical questioning, because we were not allowed to do that. In our whole upbringing we had been too much part of an authoritarian structure, which emphasised the authority of the parent, teacher, minister, or party. But there was, at the back of my mind, that constant question: Is this the real truth and the full truth?" (pp. 22-23)

Going hand-in-hand with this almost shy tendency to probe, indeed intermingled with it, was a quality which one can only describe as ordinariness. He does seem to have been in many respects a very typical Stellenbosch student of the time.

I stress this ordinariness not in any disrespect for Beyers Naudé (whom I know and admire and have worked quite closely with in the Christian Institute) but in order to make a point which I think Beyers himself would accept and appreciate. He was not, it seems, a mental or spiritual genius, or a born hero – one of those people whose biographies we read in order to dream and wonder but ultimately to confirm a sense of our own relative mediocrity. Beyers Naudé really was, and is, an ordinary guy. If I am right in my assertion, the point is an important one, in human, political and religious terms. In human terms, we realise that Beyers Naudé is in all kinds of ways like us, or like anyone or everyone else. He isn't special, or he wasn't born special; or perhaps everyone is special. This statement immediately acquires political connotations: if for all

the constraints imposed upon him by his area of South African society Beyers Naudé has been able to change and be changed in remarkable ways, so too, potentially, can many other people; so too perhaps, in the end, can almost everyone who needs to. The religious significance of all this is crucial, and it would be wrong to neglect it when one is considering the life of a profoundly Christian person. All people are related to God, all people possess (within obvious social and psychological parameters) a spark of freedom which allows them to some extent to make and remake their lives. And all people who are willing to are able to receive the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Beyers Naudé's movement – his pilgrimage, his progressing or edging or (at times) drifting from one point to the next – makes fascinating and momentous reading. The fact is that any white South African who in the 1930s got into the habit of asking (however tentatively) "Is this the real truth and the full truth?" and began to apply the question to the realities of the country's socio-political life, was bound to start to move. But to come back to Beyers's ordinariness or normality: the probings that he did, the questions that he asked at each juncture, were not visionary or prophetic, nor were they profoundly original. Beyers Naudé is not an Isaiah or an Einstein. The questions he posed were pragmatic, practical, logical, common-sensical. They were the sorts of questions that many white people would take for granted if they were working on something fairly manageable – a problem in accountancy or in yacht-making, or in computing, or whatever. Beyers has had the capacity and the willingness to use that sort of voyaging common sense in his dealings with people and in his thinking about society.

Am I justified in calling him "ordinary", or am I guilty of a tendentious rhetorical ploy? Of course in one sense he isn't ordinary; ordinary people do not normally form the subjects of biographies (and Colleen Ryan's is, on my count, the fourth book devoted to Beyers Naudé). But the word "ordinary" seems still to be a valid way of describing Beyers's central and most impressive and endearing quality: his ability to think and work his way forward, often slowly, always humbly; to be strongly influenced by other people and by current events; to admit cheerfully and openly his previous mistakes or the limitations of his understanding. All this does not represent genius or special power: it is ordinary humanity being ordinarily human. Colleen Ryan's book traces the steps in Beyers's pilgrimage so carefully and convincingly that one is struck by the reasonableness, the inevitability of his processes of thought and feeling.

So, Beyers Naudé moved from the centre of Afrikanerdom into a more liberal and ecumenical Christian grouping, and from then onwards the horizons of his socio-political and religious awareness became wider and wider.



I have said nothing about his courage: how can that be subsumed under the category of the ordinary? Perhaps it cannot. Certainly in the course of his life he has had to give up a great deal, and so has Ilse his wife (who has in several ways had a more difficult time than he has had). They have both again and again had the experience of not being supported, or fully supported, by people who a little earlier had seemed firmly with them or behind them. Beyers's capacity to stick to the logic of his position, to enact the courage of his convictions, is certainly unusual. But even here one is conscious of ordinary humanity at work (though admittedly an inspired ordinary humanity). Beyers's courage was not long-range or prophetic; in fact he was often surprised as well as saddened when friends failed to go along with him. His courage was essentially a pragmatic firmness, a simple unwillingness or inability to go back on something that logic and prayer had arrived at.

Perhaps Beyers Naudé deviates most obviously from the ordinary in the quality of his spiritual life, in his devotion to a holy logic which is essentially (he might say) a divine buttressing of the logic of humane wisdom. But then in Christian terms spirituality is ordinary: anyone who really wishes to may have access to it.

There is one problem that some readers of **Reality** may

have with the life of Beyers Naudé. In what I have said I have rather taken for granted that the movement from the old Broederbond to the ANC – or to a position very close to that of the ANC – represents the lucid work of divine and human logic. But some readers may disagree. Such readers may feel that Beyers became a little too flexible, too mobile. The more irreverent might even suggest that he has become intoxicated by the Holy Spirit and has overshot the mark of quiet moderateness traditionally associated with a religious frame of mind.

I record this problem because it is a real one, not because I hope to tackle it properly here. But I have to conclude by saying that many contemporary Christians regard the tradition of Christian "moderateness" as linked with the false notion of Christian neutrality. Christianity at its best has never been neutral. This is not to say, however, that it is not open and responsive to the needs of individuals, or that it does not work for peace and reconciliation in circumstances where those conditions are honestly attainable. Nor is it to say that Beyers Naudé is in any way a fanatical person: as Colleen Ryan makes clear, he is friendly, unassuming, good-humoured, fallible, self-critical, but at the same time very firm. Once he has made a step on his pilgrim way he cannot and does not go back on it. □