The Rev. Trevor N. W. Bush

A LETTER ON SOUTH AFRICA

To the Editors of THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW:

It is now nearly two years since I left South Africa, so perhaps I am somewhat out of date or out of touch with affairs in my homeland. But I have asked friends to write to you, a couple who have just reached Britain after being under house arrest for many months and, technically, forbidden to communicate with each other although husband and wife.

Until Sharpeville I was a fairly average white South African. As a boy I attended a segregated church and school, and accepted the servants as chattels, like everybody else. After ordination into the Anglican Ministry in 1950, it did not seem incongruous to me to employ three Africans in my Vicarage for a total *salary of £10 per month plus rations. One walked to work each day from his hut in the African village two miles away; the other two—a man of forty and a boy of ten—shared a ten-by-six foot room, with pickaninny sleeping* under *Jeremiah's bed. They used a public lavatory two blocks away and ate their food on the kitchen steps. I discharged Jeremiah after discovering that he had his wife in bed with him in his room one night without my permission.*

My African Assistant Curate ran the Mission Church in the Village, although technically I was in charge there also. He was not permitted to officiate in the white church, and always came to the back door of the Vicarage when visiting me on official business. When some coloured folk (mixed blood) gate-crashed the white Sunday service—to see what would happen—the Churchwardens insisted that they be told that the African Church was their spiritual home! I concurred. My salary was three times that of old Mtimkulu, the black curate. He was 69 and had a family to support; I was 28 and a bachelor. I lived in a three-bedroomed house, ran a new Opel, and took services in a fine little country *church which attracted weddings; while old Fr. Mtimkulu pigged it in a two roomed mud-hut, walked many miles to keep in touch with his flock, and conducted his services in a broken-down wood-and-iron building that needed a new roof and some reasonable furniture.*

In 1954 I was attracted away from Parish/Mission responsibilities to the better-paid life of a public school chaplain. Here again segregation was strictly enforced by the Anglican authorities, and very few staff members questioned the practice. The African teacher of Zulu at Michaelhouse in Natal, where I started my career as chaplain, lived (and died of pneumonia) in a concrete "pill-box" room in complete squalor, ate on his own, was barred the staff room and sports facilities, and even taught in a classroom used by no other teacher! Yet he was officially "under a cloud," suspected of association with Chief Luthuli's African National Congress—after about 20 years' "loyal and devoted service to the school"—to quote one of the tributes to him when he was safely dead!

For me, and some others—not very many—, Sharpeville changed all this.[1] *The shock of the dead bodies splashed on the front pages of the newspapers gave us new eyes. What, we asked, in God's name, had we been living with for so long? Why had we never realised our sin before? Were our spiritual leaders as blind as we had been, or were they knowingly part-and-parcel of the whole system? I still don't know.*

But Sharpeville also opened our eyes to the possible dangers, for

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[1] On the morning of Monday, March 21, 1960, a crowd of about 5000 unarmed African men, women, and children, assembled round the police station at Sharpeville, the non-white township on the outskirts of Vereeniging in the Transvaal. They had come to protest against the Pass Laws which deny freedom of movement and employment to Africans, by surrendering their passes to the Police and refusing to carry them again. After promising the crowd that senior officials would be coming later in the day to discuss their grievances with them, the police brought armoured-car reinforcements from Johannesburg and, several hours later, opened fire with Sten guns and rifles into the crowd. 67 Africans were killed and 186 injured. Many of the casualties were women and children, most wounds were inflicted in the backs of the victims, and criminal charges were brought against many of the injured, under the Apartheid Laws, before they were discharged from the hospital. Worldwide condemnation of this brutal and unnecessary killing and maiming was immediate and sustained.

white South Africans, in any change which might follow the success of the African's liberatory campaign. After so much injustice, so many decades—three centuries in fact—of injustice, whites could reasonably expect to change roles with blacks in a free South Africa. This had made the moral choice agonizingly difficult for white South Africans, and has driven the vast majority into Verwoerd's last-ditch laager (enclosure formed by wagons as a defence at night—during the Great Trek). For the rest it has meant savage punishment at the hands of the Government, and the loss of friends and close relations as well as material possessions and jobs.

But perhaps we are wrong about this as about so many other things. Before leaving South Africa for exile, to avoid arrest for helping the African National Congress, I visited some banished political leaders who are confined to a primitive camp on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. After seeing the ragged clothes hanging from nails in the mud walls of the tiny rondavels, the flattened-out cardboard cartons which served as "carpets" to keep the cold out of the bed-rolls on the ground-floor, I said to an octogenarian Chief—separated for three years from home and family 500 miles away: "Well, old man, one day you will be able to put Dr. Verwoerd into just such a hut as this!" To which he replied: "Sir, I hope that when our turn comes we shall be able to treat them in a more civilised way than they have treated us, please God."

Trevor Bush
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