

THE STATE THE CHURCH IS OTHER?

That truth and justice;
Religion and piety,
May be established among us
For all generations.

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It was about 5 in the evening when I came out of a Johannesburg cafe after one of the most fantastic days of my 64 years. A friend had promised to collect me about 9 o'clock to drive me to the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre where I am spending a few days away from my temporary banishment (voluntary) in Durban. The west door of St. Mary's Cathedral stood invitingly open. I went in and slipped on to my knees in the last pew of the vast nave. The first words which caught my ear and raised a conscious reaction were those printed at the head of this article. My mind was immediately back at Eliyotwa which I had left three hours earlier in the company of Manilal Gandhi; the only son of the Mahatma, who still lives in South Africa, and tries by various means to keep alive the spirit which was aroused in Durban, and brought to fruition in the vast sub-continent which now comprises the free nations of India and Pakistan.

Later in the evening I telephoned a friend to tell him of the events which had so suddenly turned ^{an} our orderly gathering into a defiant, rearing crowd, that Sunday afternoon when the sun was beginning to wane at the close of a perfect Transvaal winter day. He at once said: "What neckery," but is it? Let me relate the circumstances and leave each reader to form his or her own opinion.

It is close on two years now since the idea of a vast gathering of men and women from all the racial groups which comprise South Africa, and drawn from cities and villages the length and breadth of the land, was first launched by Albert Lutuli, that champion of human liberties who himself still suffers so much from the circumscription of an all-powerful racist Government. The concept quickly caught the imagination of men and women in four great semi-political organisations; The African National Congress; the Indian National Congress; the Congress of Democrats, and the Coloured Peoples' Organisation. As a definite objective it was suggested that a Freedom Charter be drawn up and adopted as an ^{it} immediate goal towards which all the peoples of the Union should strive.

Knowing something of what is involved in a proposal of this magnitude I was not very optimistic; others shook their heads and said that in any case the Government would not permit it. Wide-spread invitations to other organisations to share in the privilege of organizing such a gathering were issued, but they produced literally no response, although several organisations adopted the "wait and see" attitude which is in effect a way of saying that the organisers have not ^{had their full} the confidence of the majority of the members.

Nevertheless the vast work went on; groups were formed in towns and villages, workshops and streets. Grievances (called *demands*) were sent in and studied by national

and provincial committees. A band of volunteers was formed comprised of young men who gave all their spare time to go out and spread the news of the Congress.

At last the day broke, cold and invigorating as only a Transvaal winter day can be, heralding brilliant sunshine which would drive thousands to the playing fields in a northern hemisphere.

Almost all organizations in the country still kept aloof, including those which prided themselves on their liberalism. But the organizers were not daunted, they had done their work and were confident of a response. However critical one may have been of the preliminary stages it would be a surly person indeed who would grudge a word of praise for the way in which the vast organizational machinery was built up. No hall anywhere being available a friendly Indian merchant at Klipstow, about 12 miles west of Johannesburg, cleared his extensive yard and offered it for the gathering. A platform was erected facing rows and rows of heavy planks supported by bricks. On one side marquees and tents were erected for women, on the other for men. A huge camp kitchen was brought into being. The whole was enclosed by a low fence with one only entrance so that all credentials could be carefully checked.

At 3 p.m. Saturday, June 25th the Congress was opened. First of all two short prayers were offered in Zulu and Sesuto. Albert Luthuli being unable to attend owing to an official ban on his movements, his stirring speech was read on his behalf. Then followed a brief but rousing ceremony. Based on an African traditional custom of conferring the feather of a rare bird on a national hero a special medal was conferred on Father Trevor Huddleston, C.R., Albert Luthuli (represented by his eldest daughter) and Dr. Yusuf Dadoo (represented by his mother). The enthusiasm of the crowd was contagious. They were obviously there for a very great occasion and thundered their approval by shouting *Afrika! Mayibuyel!* together with the sign of the raised thumb.

Thereafter the main business of the Congress was followed as the draft Charter of Freedom was read, and then introduced section by section, with short, stimulating speeches, not one of which was dull. Speeches limited to 3 minutes were allowed to delegates from the floor, and there was no hesitancy. This continued right through the following day, Sunday.

Much could be said and written about this draft Charter. Unquestionably there were places where the phrasing could be improved; many of the reforms called for could only be achieved after years of patient negotiation; the desirability of a few of the demands might be disputed; and over all was the great question as to whether any such document can be understood, and therefore, adopted, by a gathering of such a size. Be all that as it undoubtedly is the fact of serious import is that the whole expressed a

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great urge for a fuller and happier life on the part of millions who have no vehicle of expression through the normal channels of democratic government. In the Congress of the People the inarticulate masses of South Africa found a forum.

Altogether there were over 2,500 accredited delegates, together with a considerable group of observers (among whom was the writer), and outside the fence - several more thousands of listeners and a couple of hundred uniformed police carrying a variety of weapons from sten guns to batons. Immediately opposite the platform just outside the fence was a car of detectives wire-reporting the entire proceedings.

From 3 p.m. Saturday until 3 p.m. on Sunday complete orderliness reigned together with a buoyant spirit of goodwill and friendliness which gave an absolute lie to any idea of one section of the community seeking their own interests regardless of others. During the breaks for food (of which there was ample, served with entire absence of confusion) the scene was reminiscent of a vast holiday crowd bent on getting the most out of a glorious day.

Then came the great upheaval.

Into the arena marched a posse of about 25 uniformed police making for the platform. They came from behind the audience which at first thought it was the arrival of a new delegation. Then it became clear. In a moment the great sea of people rose, raised their right fists with upstretched thumbs, and sang their song "Siyabona Sibusiso Sibusiso Afrika" to the tune of Glaxo. For full ten minutes it went on like the sound of a mighty host approaching the summit of victory. On the platform similar officers were talking with the chairman who at last quietened the crowd and got them seated again.

Then the announcement was made. A warrant had been served alleging that no-one was-allowed-to-believe-that as an investigation of possible treason is being carried out everyone present would have to hand over all papers in their possession, and give their names and addresses. Having read the warrant the chairman said the meeting would not be intimidated and so would proceed but those who wished could start to file out past the tables at the entrance where names would be written and documents taken. He appealed for orderly compliance which was maintained until the last delegate left some four hours later. White delegates were directed to one table, Indians and Coloured people to another, while there were three or four tables. A few Africans for the hundreds of Africans who were said to be without correct passes, or had left their registration books at home, were taken to the police station. Several Europeans complained that they were deprived of personal documents, and pocket diaries, without being given a receipt, but observers who remained to the end say that there were no incidents, which does not deny that there was acute irritation and all the bustling and pushing which is inevitable in such a situation. It says much for the control of the

parties: the police who were carrying out instructions from higher officials, and the people who were so abruptly intercepted just when coming to the climax of the meeting.

Thus we are led to the colloquial question: And now, what?

He would be a foolish prophet indeed who would attempt to say what sort of place such a day will take in the bloodless revolution which is taking place in South Africa, as in many other countries of the world. Nothing can stop such a tidal wave, the question is whether it will be allowed to continue its course, or whether attempts will be made to dam up the flow and so form a situation which can only end in disaster to the architects. Whatever the future it is in the nature of the historical process that June 25/26th will rank high in annals of the struggle to establish a nation from which all discrimination, hatred and injustice will vanish away.

Even before the raid took place there was no indication that any sort of continuation organization was to be established: probably the plan of the sponsoring bodies was to report back to their various annual gatherings with a view to co-ordinated future planning in which they might hope to be joined by others who waited to see the success of the first gathering before actually committing themselves.

As I have already written, the freedom charter as adopted was very much a draft. Detail discussion, further drafting and final adoption is in the nature of things a colossal task. What is significant is the fact that so large a number, from all walks of life, and representing even greater numbers throughout the country, are beginning to think, and are determined to let it be known that the "good life" is the heritage of all, and not only of privileged people,

While the vast majority present belonged to the manual workers of the land there was a very considerable number of professional people (including a score or more ministers of religion), students and women. The report of the scrutineers gave: 2196 Africans; 320 Indians; 230 Coloured people; 112 white people. It is doubtful whether such a comprehensive cross-section of the population has ever before been gathered together in South Africa to state a pattern of life which can ensure peace and harmony for all. It can only be hoped that wise counsels will prevail and that such a movement will not be driven underground where it might easily take a very different shape.

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TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961

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