

The Two White Races in South Africa

David Mesenbring

Most Americans concerned for South Africa tend to fault Afrikaans-speaking whites for apartheid and to look with hope toward the English-speakers. As a result, Afrikaners have tended to become isolated, easily written off as stubbornly intransigent in their racism. This habit of mind misrepresents the larger and more powerful group of whites who, given their Christian moralism, may be overlooked as a hidden resource for change. My experiences with a wide variety of South Africans provide reason to suggest a revisionist approach. Some historical background on the two white communities may help the reader to make sense of this suggestion.

Whites first arrived in Southern Africa as employees of the Dutch East India Company, which wanted to establish a refreshment station for its ships traveling between the Netherlands and the Far East. The company's employees established Cape Town but were never able to exchange enough trade with the local indigenous population—at least not enough to feed the ever-increasing number of ships passing through Table Bay. Thus white settlement occurred in the Cape, transforming it from a land of nomadic African pastoralists into one of white-owned farms. From their arrival at the Cape in 1652, more than three hundred years ago, until after Dutch control passed into British hands about 1800, the white population steadily polarized itself into one of two camps.

Today these two camps are labeled as English and Afrikaans. But initially the dichotomy was urban/rural. Cape Town was the seat of economic and political power, with a cosmopolitan white population that still considered itself to be European. But the whites who went inland to settle as farmers (called *boers*) became a different stock. The Dutch among them were former employees of the company, who eagerly grabbed an opportunity to become landowners. Many French Huguenots came in search of religious freedom from the persecution they suffered in Catholic France. Later,

many Germans would arrive. All faced the same harsh realities of carving out some self-sufficient life-style amid an alien geography, climate, and people. There was little time left over for maintaining communications with Europe. From such roots sprang a new culture in Africa: the white tribe of Afrikaners.

From their earliest beginnings Afrikaners have distrusted “slick city folk” who too often used power over the isolated farmers to political and economic advantage. For their part the urban whites of South Africa have seldom respected rural people, whom they view as culturally backward, stubborn, and illiterate. When the British arrived to rule the Cape early in the nineteenth century, they adopted prevalent Cape Town attitudes toward the Boers. At times they even advanced colonial policies designed to anglicize the Afrikaners. Hostility between these two white communities climaxed at the turn of the twentieth century, when they actually went to war. Though the British eventually won that war, a devastated Afrikaner population regenerated itself during the first half of this century. In 1948 their Nationalist party came to political power with a parliamentary majority that has grown in every subsequent election.

This background is essential to understand the animosity that exists today between English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans. Though they are politically aligned in a system of white supremacy, each group still maintains its own linguistic, social, and economic identity. When American business, church, or media people visit South Africa, they inevitably migrate to the English, with whom they feel a sense of cultural affinity. The result is a propagation of some inaccurate stereotypes about the people of South Africa. Of course blacks are by far the largest part of South Africa's population. They too are badly stereotyped by the outside world, but that is the subject of another article.

The Afrikaner is often thought to be an archconservative and uneducated farmer who still quotes the Bible in sincere defense of racism. In contrast, the English are often portrayed as responsi-

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ble liberals who object to the overt racism of apartheid but find themselves outnumbered by members of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Nationalist party (religious and political wings of the Afrikaans people). In view of these stereotypes, it is easy to understand how someone like Donald Woods, the journalist now in exile, can so quickly become a celebrated figure in the United States. After he fled South Africa in December, 1977, he published a successful book, went on TV and radio talk shows, even gained government audiences in Washington. His message to Americans starts with this quotation from an article by him in *The New York Review of Books*: "South Africa has only one major 'problem,' and that is apartheid" (May 4, 1978). Entitled "The Indictment," the article goes on to blame Afrikaners for apartheid. But the truth is that the superiority complex of white racism is more central to the history of Western culture than simply thirty years of Afrikaner apartheid.

Another typical example of English liberalism in South Africa is a friend, whom I shall call Robin. During the elections of November, 1977, Robin represented the opposition Progressive Federal party as a parliamentary candidate in Johannesburg. His analysis of the South African situation: "Blacks have a lousy deal under apartheid. Unless we make some changes to improve their stake in the system, we face an inevitable revolt in which we stand to lose everything. By stubbornly refusing to make any real changes, Afrikaners are leading us toward disaster." Too often I found English liberalism in South Africa to be an exercise of anti-Afrikaner sentiment rather than a position of genuine respect for blacks and what they have to offer that political system.

The danger facing "outsiders" who align themselves with English liberalism is that we will ignore the most important lesson of this chapter in Western history. That lesson, quite simply, is that white Western good will is not enough to save us from the problems that have evolved with the spread of our way of life. The real challenge to face is not how to cut most effectively the loss of white privilege, but how to accept and *be changed* by creative black leadership.

The danger in aligning ourselves too closely with the liberal English-speaking whites of South Africa is that we will follow their example in isolating the Afrikaners.

Reinhold Niebuhr (as well as others before and after him) reminded us that self-interest lies near the heart of all our political behavior. That motivation is only too apparent in the case of the liberal Robins; they prefer to share *some* of their privileges now rather than risk losing them *all* later.

No doubt Afrikaner morality also includes a dimension of self-interest. That morality is now politically conservative, yet that conservative morality may one day prove the Afrikaners to be more capable than the English of adapting to really major changes. It has been suggested that a similar phenomenon exists here in the United States. White Southerners were long thought to be more racially conservative than Northern liberals. Yet today it is the South more than the North that has proved itself capable of really major changes.

W A. de Klerk in *The Puritans in Africa* (Penguin Books, 1976) compares the Afrikaner Calvinists to the puritans who settled their "new world" in the United States. He draws parallels that are striking and even somewhat alarming. Most important for our purpose is his understanding of Afrikaners as people with a radical sense of divinely ordained mission to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth, today. De Klerk describes them as radicals of the Right who believe they have a divinely ordained responsibility to act as architects of other people's futures. Thus, Afrikaners are shameless in the face of international charges that they, a minority, are running the affairs of a black majority. Afrikaners believe that as long as their administration is undertaken in a moral spirit of Christian stewardship, then they are being true to a divine calling from which they dare not shrink.

In light of this it is not surprising that the early politicians of apartheid were careful to solicit approval from theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church, who held conferences to document a biblical basis for this political doctrine. Only once, in 1960, did the church threaten to withdraw its theological sanction. After the Sharpeville Massacre, discussion among church leaders in South Africa with leaders of the World Council of Churches resulted in an ecumenical South African consultation held in December, 1960. Convened at Cottesloe, near Johannesburg, it included representatives from each of the mainline denominations in South Africa, and after several days of biblically oriented discussion a series of resolutions was passed unanimously, including some that challenged apartheid. That such a line was indeed threatening to the government can be seen in then Prime Minister Vorwoerd's immediate and sharp attack. Soon afterwards Dutch Reformed participants in Cottesloe either recanted or found themselves rejected by their synods.

How does all this translate into the thinking of the individual Afrikaner? Consider another of my white South African friends, an Afrikaner, whom I shall call Urie. Urie's rationale for change differs dramatically

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from that of Robin. "We must evaluate our system in terms of how it effects *all* the people who live in it. No system is perfect. So when we find mistakes, we must face them and make improvements."

I respect Urie's rationale more than Robin's. The moral dimension of Urie's motivation is characteristic of Afrikaner puritanism. Afrikaners have been able to approve their system morally because, in fact, they don't really know how that system is affecting other people. Separation of the races in South Africa has been achieved to the point at which whites have only two types of contact with blacks, one in work situations and the other through the media. All their physical contact occurs within a context of meeting blacks in subservient roles. With jobs always hard to find, blacks have learned to say only what whites want to hear.

As for the media, the South African Broadcasting Company, which owns most radio and the only TV station, is technically an independent and self-supporting corporation, but the board of directors is appointed by the government. Its information and interpretation of life in South Africa must be described as political idealism. Sunny South Africa's biased news coverage insures that Afrikaner Christians will have very convenient information for evaluating how their system is working for the "other people." American Christians may sometimes know more about the unpleasant realities of South Africa. By isolating Afrikaners we make it easier for them to live undisturbed within their shell of self-deception. This may be why some black leaders encourage greater communication between American Christians and Afrikaners. What might happen if Afrikaners were to find out that their system is not proving so desirable for the "other people" who have to live in it? This is where Urie becomes particularly revealing of his people and culture.

Urie's way of viewing life is typically Afrikaner, but his experiences are not. Like most other Afrikaners, he grew up on a rural farm where church, neighbors, school, and the media taught him what other Afrikaners believe. Then he moved to Johannesburg and started his own international business. Every year now he makes a business trip to the U.S. and Europe, where he encounters liberal challenges from which other South Africans are isolated. One result of this contact has been his decision to make some friends in the black community back home. Now Urie's family has a social relationship with the family of a politically moderate black businessman from Soweto.

On October 19, 1977, the government cracked down on the Black Consciousness Movement that, since its 1968 advent, had been rapidly gaining influence among urban blacks in South Africa. The movement's preeminent leader, Steve Biko, had died violently while being held in police custody five weeks earlier. Among the hundreds whom police detained on October 19 were Urie's own Soweto friends. When the police justified their action as measures necessary to control a radically subversive element of Communist agitators operating among the black population,

most Afrikaners accepted the explanation. But Urie knew it was simply untrue; suddenly he began to question a lot of government propaganda he had uncritically accepted before.

More from Urie: "We've been defending our system by saying that whites are better able to lead this country than most of the blacks. But something has gone wrong somewhere when we start treating decent law-abiding people as if they were dangerous criminals with no human rights. Now we must prove our claim to leadership by finding out what is wrong and making the necessary corrections. It's a responsibility we have long taken upon ourselves."

Today Urie is concerned about his government and is working to change its course. He is one of a very small group of Afrikaners who, by virtue of various mutations, have managed to crack the shell of isolation that has protected their moral self-righteousness all these years. As long as Afrikaners remain comfortably ignorant about the realities they judge, their moral categories mean little to a long-suffering black population. But, having believed in themselves all these years, people like Urie feel obligated to act once they find out what is really going on. Perhaps South Africa has become too oppressively authoritarian for Urie and others to make a difference now. But their dynamic and example are important also to Americans. As De Klerk points out, we Americans operate with a version of the same Christian morality. We too are isolated from huge sectors of the world's population who suffer from the present world order that we tend to accept uncritically.

Carol is another friend, an American who works for a leading U.S. drug company with interests in South Africa. Carol once told me that she thinks "there are plenty of decent people at my company who want to do the right thing but simply don't know what's going on." Sensitive to the current debate about the responsibility of U.S. corporations in South Africa, Carol gives living witness to her faith that by getting involved and studying the issues, she can help to correct any moral failings for which her company may be responsible.

Western Christians everywhere have a lot in common with Afrikaners. Instead of isolating them as a symbol of evil, we might do better to search with them for solutions to problems shared by the entire Western world, and to problems that we in the West create for others. An immediate economic boycott of South Africa could be productive as a means of gaining Afrikaner attention. But if concerned Westerners are to realize the potential resource latent in Afrikaner moralism, then our *isolating action* might engage Afrikaners in a common moral quest.

In summary, the Afrikaners—not the English—are the key to change within the white South African community. They face the same fundamental problems and speak a common Christian dialect with many other Western Christians. It is dangerous for Afrikaners and their Western Christian counterparts to become isolated from each other. A cooperative relationship might help all of us recognize that Western good intentions do not automatically translate into justice "for others" in our one world. **WV**