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1972-08
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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm MONDAY AUGUST 1972

Title: The Political Function of Some Religious Movements in South Africa.

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No. 004

1972.

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(39)

THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF SOME RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA.

A title such as the above conveys some general meaning. The statement: ' The church has a profound influence on South African political life' is fairly evident and may mean changing, reinforcing or manipulating the established political order. It may even mean working towards the abolishment of this order. It is in this relatively neutral sense the term 'function' will be used below.

The interrelationship between politics and religion found in the Church - State relationship is usually institutionalized. Emergent religious movements have not reached the degree of institutionalization of a church. Consequently their relationship with the governing body will not yet be routinized. Yet they may have a profound influence in challenging the legitimacy of established political authority. We therefore have to postulate a much more general use of the word 'function' which possibly includes 'disfunction' and non institutionalized elements. When speaking of 'function' we are furthermore dealing with the political consequences of social action by religious bodies. This raises the problem of the orientation of social action. Is it consciously directed towards the sphere of politics or do the actions performed have unintended political consequences?

In order to answer this question it is essential to differentiate between 'function' and 'intent' of social action. These concepts represent two different perspectives on social action. 'Function' indicates an interrelationship objectivated by the scientist, whereas 'intent' in a sociological sense, reflects the expectations an actor has of the effects of his own action. When 'function' overlaps with 'intent', a certain action has intended consequences, or, in Merton's[1] terms, a manifest function. When this is not the case, the consequences are unintended and the function latent. Intent, as noted, refers to the effects/consequences of the action performed. In Alfred Schutz's[2] terms intent would include a projection of a future state to be achieved. This state is envisaged by the actor in terms of a completed action.

Intent should be clearly distinguished from the relatec concept of Intentionality. Projecting a future action or intending to act is determined by the actor's perception of the

reality in which he lives. This perception and awareness of the world the actor lives and acts in is called a relationship of intentionality. The concept, first developed by Brentano and Husserl, has been applied effectively to the social sciences by Stefan Strasser[3] and Alfred Schutz.[4] The question of what meaning the total known environment conveys to the individual should first be examined before an understanding of meaningful action and it's consequences could be reached. In the South African religious movements where the discovery of meaning plays such a prominent role this procedure is essential. Anselm Strauss has indicated how the problem of identity is involved in the individuals mirroring of himself in his social environment. The alienation experienced when the reflected image does not represent the 'self' as understood by the observer[5] may lead to the projection and construction of an environmental reality which does reflect the desired image of self. This construction most often takes place on the religious plane but has far reaching consequences in other areas as well. (Politics, Economics) Looking at the relationship of intentionality Africans have with their environment or everyday world, we have to differentiate between the rural and urban. educated and uneducated. There are, however, many common features in this relationship. The passive political role Africans have in ('white') rural and urban areas are very similar. In such questions as economic development, settlement, education. social care, professional mobility, etc., all but an active role is assigned to them. In urban areas especially the impression is created that Africans are objects of administration being instrumentalized in the national economy. This lack of control over their own fate is generally resented and the presence of white society constantly offers the opportunity for comparing their own condition with that which they desire and for which a need has been created. D.F.Aberle[6] defines relative deprivation - "...as the negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and actuality." This concept typifies an important aspect of the Africans' relationship of intentionality with their world. When this discrepancy remains within tolerable limits, the world a population sector lives in may be taken for granted. When this discrepancy forces itself on a group of people to such an extent that awareness and resentment of it is general, the possibility of a popular movement coming into being exists. Such an initiative may utilize the existing system of co-ordinates to attain reform within the

existing socio-political order but it may also under certain circumstances reject the system and it's rules (Constitution) for another and new construction of reality. This for example is the case with some millenarian movements and cargo cults. In discussing the political function of integrative religious movements, the whole spectrum of possible projections and constructs should be examined. We are thus not primarily interested in the possible movement and power of rook, bishop and queen on the chessboard but also in the possibility of the rules being changed and even the composition of the chessboard/arena, itself. This is the range of possible action before us and may encompass Quietism on the one hand and revolutionary activism on the other.

What has been said sofar may be applicable to political, economic and religious forms of action. Welbourn[7] suggested that the problem of religious independentism in Africa should not be separated from the political questions in the countries of it's occurrence. This is a timely remark for the study of South African religious phenomena too. The establishment of a new order of things whether it be through the French Revolution or a Ghost-Dance has both political and religious characteristics.

In South Africa we have a range of actions in the African religious movements. The projection of the desired state of affairs differs from the existing order of things. In constructing a typology of the various action complexes we will take 1. the projection of a future state 2. the construction of a pattern of action and 3. the consequences of the completed acts into account.

Three basic action-complexes can be distinguished viz. the escapistic; adventistic and activist. The activist type of action wants to attain a better deal for Africans through consultation with the intention of reforming the existing order. It may develop into the direct action of overthrowing the existing order as a result of the frustration of previous attempts. The second type is characterized by the projection of an ideal state not to be achieved through human agency but through the acts of the supernatural. Man has only to prepare himself for that occurrence. The third action complex projects an ideal secular order of the world by constructing a substitute secular order next to the existing one which, for the time being, is tolerated but from which refuge is taken in the substitute order.

The last mentioned becomes a reality in the idea of a 'holy mountain' or of the social group of the independent church (inter-alia) but may also be compared to the Peyotism of the American Indians.

Escapism

The so-called Zionist churches, the large semi-messianic movements founded by
I. Shembe and Lekganyane and the numerous secret prayer groups all exhibit an escapistic action-type. They are often avowedly non-political.

They construct alternative social orders where the passivity and lask of status their adherents have in the existing socio-political order is compensated for by elaborate status systems and active participation in their churches or movements. Members who have a low status and education even in the African community itself find their real identity within this substitute order.

The evil which befalls members is most frequently ascribed to witchcraft or to the activity of the spirits - whether ancestors or Holy Spirit. Evil may manifest itself through illness or bad luck in everyday life. Living in harmony with the spirit-world ensures health and good luck. Salvation is associated with the physical well being and health of a member. Harmony with the spirit world is found within the church group. Church leaders, especially the prophet type play a role akin to that of the diviner in traditional society. They establish the causes of illness and misfortune and suggest purification and strengthening procedures. Evil and misfortune which may befall one, include losing one's job, being endorsed out of town, being caught without a pass-book etc. The cause for these misfortunes is not sought within the impersonal socio-political systems but located with personal agents such as the spirit or the witch.

The projection of a more satisfying order parallel to the existing one, allows a member to earn his bread in one but find his identity in the other. The constructs of action are directed at establishing harmony with the spirit by clearing the way for him through purification and obeying his will. Neither the projection nor the construct refer to changing or abolishing the existing socio-political order. This is not intended. The intended consequences are secular well-being and heavenly

reward. In a political sense this action complex may have another unintended consequence namely that of protest against the existing socio-political order.

The independent churches often create the impression of many small disjunct groups. This is far from the truth as extensive networks of communication and co-operation exist between these. In 1965 the African Independent Churches Association was formed in which these networks were institutionalized.[8] Through representative bodies such as this one the independent churches may enter the mainstream of events within South African socio-political life.

Adventism

The underlying assumption of the second action-type postulates an imminent and automatic 'coming' of the ideal state. This ideal state is often an inversion of the present socio-political order. The constructs of action emphasize the preparation of the believers for this new state.[9] Various millenarian phenomena exhibit this action type.

In 1856 it was prophesied to the Xhosa that the ancestors would appear on a certain day, that the Whites would be driven into the sea and that the sun would rise in the west. The living had to prepare themselves by killing all their cattle and by burning their fields. At the coming of the ancestors the Xhosa would have received abundant food and beautiful cattle. On the set day 18/19 February 1857 nothing happened. Subsequently some 30,000 Xhosa died of starvation. This tragic incident has to be seen against the background of the subjugation of the Xhosa tribes on the Eastern Cape Border and the population pressure in this region.

In the Bulhoek incident of 1921 we have another example of adventistic action. In 1907 Enoch Mgijima received a call 'to lead his people'. Subsequently the occurrence of the two world wars and their effects were revealed to him. The Whites would be destroyed in the second. Initially Mgijima founded the religious community of the Israelites. Shortly after the first World War they occupied Crown territory in the Bulhoek area. They were ordered to leave but refused. Mgijima considered the area to be their god-given possession and prphesied the destruction of the Whites trying to evict them. This would have happened without the intervention of the Israelites.

They nevertheless armed themselves. In the confrontation with government troops in May 1921, 183 people died. In this incident the action of preparation was followed by violent and direct action.

Activism

This action complex can be subdivided in constitutional action and direct revolutionary action. Action is aimed at influencing the existing order itself. Whereas the Zionist churches can be linked to the activities of representatives of the enthusiastic American Pentecostal Movement, the Ehtiopian churches were strongly influenced by the emanicipatory tendencies of the American Negroes at the turn of the century. The political undertone of Ethiopionism is marked- even in its surviving forms today. Churches of this type exhibit a leadership pattern comparable to that of a tribal chief according to Sundkler. It is expected from the leader that he speak on behalf of and intervene for his people. Through the history of Ethiopionism leaders acted in this role, working towards a better deal for their people - not only in the narrow framework of their respective congregations but also in that of serving Africans in general. In the 1920's the need for a national church was felt.[10] Ethiopian leaders associated themselves with the ANC to make representations with the government against discriminatory laws. The projection of a future desired state ranged from the ideal of equal rights and opportunities for Africans in the same socio-political order as the Whites to that of gaining ascendancy over them. Similarly the constructs of action ranged from employing constitutional means to using more revolutionary means. The fact that some of the most enthusiastic leaders of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 were preachers and ordinary members of Ethiopian Churches proves this point sufficiently.[11] The action type of this category of churches differs from the previous two insofar as it comes to grips with the system itself.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to illustrate the motivational structure of the actions of some religious movements in South

Africa. Without much elaboration it was indicated that certain aspects of the relationship of intentionality with the experienced world gave rise to a desire for an alternative world, which would be acceptable to the persons involved - which could be taken for granted. The projection of, and action constructs towards reaching this world, occurs after, what Camus would describe as a "prise de conscience" by the Africans involved - a categorical refusal of identifying oneself with the present-order and an awareness of the justness of one's case.[12] [13] When the political function of religious movements in South Africa is formulated in terms of revolt, there need not be a large gap between the intentional and functional perspectives. In fact the distinction of functions may be much less random when the relationships of intentionality and the intent of action are examined.

Finally it is amazing to see how the current political ideology among Africans exhibit similar features to those found in religious movements. The idea of a suffering people is found in the Zionist-type sects, the secret prayer groups, the 'Israelites' and among the Ethiopians. Luthuli's autobiography bears the title - Let My People Go.[14] The relationship of intentionality is characterized by suffering through the whole spectrum of the religious movements. At the one end suffering is sickness and misfortune - at the other it becomes articulated in a clearer way.

Another common feature is the reference to the spirit which sanctions and justifies action among escapists and which recurs in Luthuli's autobiography: "I have joined my people in the new spirit that moves them today, the spirit that revolts openly and boldly against injustice and expresses itself in a determined non-violent manner." [15]

These are only two examples among many and it would be worthwhile to conduct further study into the problem of the role diverse religious movements in South Africa play in preparing the way for a language of revolt.

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28th July 1972.

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8. For detail about further attempts at co-operation see Becken, H-J.: "Patterns of Organizational Structures in the African Independent Churches Movement in South Africa" in Africana Marburgensia I/2 1968.p.24.

9. The two examples cited are described in more detail in Schlosser, K.: Propheten in Afrika, Braunschweig, 1949 and Eingeborenenkirchen in Süd- und Südwestafrika, Kiel, 1958.

10.Sundkler, B.G.M.: Bantu Prophets in South Africa, London 1961. p.50.

11. ibid. p.69

12. Camus, A.: l'Homme révolté, St. Amand, 1951. p. 26.
" Si confusément que ce soit, une prise de conscience naît du mouvement de révolte : la perception, soudain éclatante, qu'il y a dans l'homme quelque chose à quoi l'homme peut s'identifier, fût-ce pour un temps."

13. idem p. 25.

14. Luthuli, A.: Let my people go! Johannesburg 1961.

15. <u>op. cit.</u> p. 336.