

Interview: Beyers Naude

Q So much is said about your change from inherent racial views of white South Africans to the non-racial point of view. So I wanted to take it back to the early years and ask you if you can speak a bit about how involved and supportive of the Nationalist or at that point the Afrikaner and government point of view you were. I remember I read that you had Verwoerd as a sociology lecturer. Maybe that is not anything to discuss but I just wondered do you remember how you saw him at that time?

A Well, he was a very good lecturer. He never used any notes in lecturing. He was detached from his class. He walked in, gave his lecture, he finished it and walked out.

Q What about what he said and did you even in those days did you have any doubts?

A No, no doubts whatsoever. No doubts what so ever. I came from a very religious, conservative Afrikaner home and in which the authority both of parent, of teacher, of minister or priest or of the political leaders was not questioned. There was nothing in our whole educational system or in the education of, for instance of our children in our home, which even suggested a more critical frame of mind.

So there was no question of my either doubting or questioning anything, which a lecturer like Dr. Verwoerd may have stated.

Q And does that kind of view that you understand so well, because you experienced it, does it make you understand more how white South African, or perhaps Afrikaans-speaking people, are seen, say the current unrest. Coz I don't think we have to bother talking about anything other than a very high-pitched level that is going to continue and the kind of thing where they see the SABC and they see the kind of things going on, they hear that blacks are killing blacks, do you remember, does it help you to think what the fears of them are about?

A Oh yes, all the time. And in fact the responses from Afrikaners, telephone calls which one receives, Afrikaners denouncing me, swearing at me, calling me all kinds of names, denoting me to be a traitor to the Afrikaner cause, all these remind me of the fact that many of these Afrikaners are the products of both a home education, a school education, a religious education, where certain sets standard of

Interview: Beyers Naube

A authority and the symbols of authority have put them into a frame of mind where they do not realise to what degree the lack of a critical approach makes it very difficult for them even to start questioning what is being presented to them by way of either political or religious or general truth. And therefore I understand it and I deeply sympathise but I therefore also realise that people who have been born, bred, educated, trained in that frame of mind and in that climate, that it is much more difficult for them to make a breakthrough to a more positive critical frame of mind than for others, who for instance ^{have} come from that background, for instance, many of your English speaking, Jewish speaking and other whites in SA.

Q And when you were growing up was the Broederbond something to aspire to? Did you-

A No doubt about it. It was seen to be one of the most sort after positions that one ^{could} help or ever be able to come into it; to be offered in your Afrikaans establishment, there was not a question about it. It was deemed to be a singular honour to have been approached and asked to become a member of the Broederbond.

Q Can you talk about how you saw blacks? You were in the Broederbond, what kind of a point of view? I mean you are someone who is deeply religious, you had an inherent humanism; how did the view of blacks fit into that?

A When you says blacks are you referring to so called Coloureds or Indians or Africans?

Q So was that different to you?

A Oh, yes. That is why I am asking. Because as far as your blacks, and there I refer those of an African ethnic background. I had no, or practically no contact with them in my early life because my father was a minister on Roodeport, Transvaal where I was born; when I was five, well four and a half years he moved to Piet Retief where we stayed until I was nearly six. Therefore the first time black nannies or servants in the home served us there, or came in as servants in the Parsonage, but that was a very short period and I have no recollection of any association, any influence, any relationship towards blacks.

Interview: Beyers Naude

A coloureds. There were blacks, there were Africans somewhere there behind, but as far as I was concerned they never entered my vision, of association. Coloureds yes, to a certain degree.

Then moved to Stellenbosch, completed my eight years of both academic and theological study, for years each; during that time I fell in love ^{with} my wife, Elsa. She was the daughter of a missionary, she was born in Genaandal in therefore a Coloured community. Therefore the first time I came into much more personal close contact with the coloured community.

And then from there I moved to a, first of all a congregation in Wellington, where again my association with those on the other side of the colour line, were with coloured people in the ~~1888~~ N.G. Kerk Congregation there, where I preached also from time to time. Then the same happened in Lockstan where there were a few blacks but people mainly of coloured or coloured descent.

From there to the Transvaal, there for the first time I came in touch with ~~the~~ reality of Africans. But even there only on the margin. Because in my work I never had any personal contact with the African community. It was only when I became acting moderator in Transvaal at that stage in Potchefstroom that I was invited by young ministers whom I had come to know when I was a student minister in Pretoria, who was serving then both black and coloured and Indian congregations. And who in their ministry were confronted by the deep forms of injustice of the whole apartheid policy, which they then conveyed to me. Only then for the first time did the African perception of the situation in the country begin to dawn on me.

It may sound incredible but this is true and I think it is also very helpful perception, because in the same way thousands and thousands of Afrikaans and I would say also certainly, to a certain degree, English speaking whites, you know if I had the same experience, where the human perception and human relationships with blacks as human beings on a level therefore of friendship and understanding has never been the experience of thousands of them.

Q When was your first experience of a black African as a human being?

A I cannot say that because I have got no recollection of that, no speci-

Interview: Beyers Naude

A specific recollection of that, such a specific meeting or event.

Q Or was there anyone that you met in the early years when you were starting to change that made you just sit back and think my God, this man is intelligent and warm or whatever?

A I cannot recollect a specific person. What I do recollect is in my response to those ministers who invited me to come to meet with their parishes or their church councils. I for the first time began to discover that here were ministers, black ministers, speaking Afrikaans, able to convey their thoughts, their feelings, their frustrations, in very sophisticated language and thereby beginning to realise that here was a perception which I'd up till now been totally or largely unaware of.

Q Now, that is the interesting ^{thing} to ask—but blacks have also like to ask about your view of whites who were anti-apartheid, who didn't accept that structure or that view of SA, that apartheid view? Do you remember how you saw whites, say in the 40s and 50s, who were crossing the colour bar, who were involved politically, who seemed to be with the blacks and for the blacks.

A Well let me say that I had no, in my ministry, both in the early years in Wellington, in Lockston and in Pretoria South and as a student pastor in Pretoria University, I had no contact with such people because normally you know, it was only within the confines of ones of the Afrikaner establishment, but my general attitude was one of a very critical one of those people if they were Afrikaners.

If they were English-speaking South Africans we had always taken it for granted that they were the kaffir boeties and that therefore it could be expected of, for instance, of a Anglican priest or an Archbishop or bishop that this is where they would be. There was no, as far as that was concerned, there was no additional negative response.

But it was different if it was an Afrikaner. An Afrikaner that was seen to be a threat and in the...the whole framework of our own home and family life, of the Afrikaner community in which I lived, such people were regarded as traitors if they really moved so far out that they were not seen to be supporting the Afrikaner cause.

Interview: Beyens Naude

Q Do you remember reading the papers about Bram Fisher? Did that...

A I had no awareness of Bram Fisher, neither of the ANC up till the first time, it was only with Sharpeville and with the discussions which we then had in the Cotterlooe consultation that for the first time a, I became aware that there were such people.

Q So you hadn't heard of the Congress of Democrats

A No, I knew nothing about them, nothing. Not even of the ANC. I had no awareness of what the ANC was, COD, whatever the case may be.

Q So when was the discovery of that, of the ANC. How did that come?

A Well, the ANC was...the first was when Lutuli was awarded the Nobel Peace prize, that I became aware that there was such a person as Lutuli and that there was such an organisation like the ANC.

Q And what did you think? At that time? Did you right away believe the government's view of it?

A Oh no, I simply, I accepted the government's view as correct. I didn't doubt it, I didn't question it whatsoever.

Q And the kind of swart gevaar shorthand for you, for your point of view what were the values behind that? What was this terrible danger? Was it something as specific as communism, or was it the unknown, what was it about?

A No, I don't think it was communism, not at all. That didn't enter my mind. It was the fact of numerical superiority, a widely different culture, standards of life, a normal, you know ways of living, which I felt to be a threat to everything which is dear to the Afrikaner community.

Q And if someone...had you ever been confronted with an argument, even just a very basic liberal argument that what about these people's own desires and aspirations?

A Nobody in the Afrikaner community ever raised such a question. And for the first time where this came into the open was in our discussions at Cotterlooe, when the other churches represented here, presented their

Interviews: Beryers Naude

A papers and debated their view points and we had to listen to them.

Q Ok, there are very sophisticated descriptions of the Cottesloe conversion; could you give a more simple description, maybe not as much of a theological one, well one that I think perhaps some of the black people who'd read this, and some of the uninitiated whites would be able to relate to it. Would you explain ..could you just give a little bit of an explanation. As I say, I know there is a lot that I have read, but in your own words how can you explain what happened to you?

A No, well, I made this clear already before that that was a process. Cottesloe was preceded by a long, I was not, I would say long, by a series of meetings which within the ~~Engel~~^{N.G.} Kerk. I and other ministers had organised after my experience with those young ministers who were serving African and coloured and Indian congregations. And where when I came even before I came to Joberg, I started to organise those meetings on a multi racial basis with ministers of the, black ministers, and coloured ministers of the black Dutch Reformed Church. And where, in our discussions, viewpoints were presented which reflected the other side of the situation and of the picture on our country.

So that in that sense certain perspectives of what was happening ⁱⁿ the coloured and the Indian and the African community, these were known to me, when Sharpeville came. And then with Sharpeville there was the request for the memoranda which each, memorandum which each church had to present towards the discussion of the conference and in which I participated to draw up; all the salient facts, the view points, the issues. And in that sense it was a preparation therefore, also for what happened.

But quite a number of perspectives coming from black and coloured and Indian Christians were members of the so called ~~Engel~~^{N.G.} daughter churches of the ~~Engel~~^{N.G.} kerk, these had already been presented to us in such small meetings which we held once a month. So that that in itself was no longer something new to me and that, I think, was a process therefore of letting me realise that there were other understandings and other perspectives which had not been dealt with, not been presented, either by the church or by the Broederbond or by the Afrikaans establishment.

Q Can you just give a little bit or more specifics just starting with Sharpeville itself. There wasn't TV then, you just heard it through the Afrikaans papers then. Was it or was there any personal account that

Interview: Beyers Naude

Q moved you? Was there...when one thinks of Uitenhage, 1985 and the shock and the horror, condemnation, what was it like then to hear that 69 blacks had been shot dead?

A It was a matter of my driving in from Aarvoelkop, where I was then minister of religion, I drove in that morning to a meeting which I had in town and for the first time I saw the posters of what had happened. That was the first knowledge and perception thereof and my realisation in view of those discussions which we have had of the tensions which those white ministers had experienced in their congregations, that this was a very serious matter but that was all.

I had no, I saw this as a very serious matter. I didn't see this in that sense as a serious crisis, either national or possibly international crisis. I just viewed it from the perspective of the growing tension between black and white and that this would seriously, this would definitely create serious problems for us in the church, that was all.

Q So was there a difference then as if 69 Stellenbosch students had been killed, I mean did part of you say well of course the police had to keep this under control?

A Oh it would, certainly yes. I mean although I had begun to have certain I would say, grave...certain doubts with regard to the matters. Certainly if the number had been people, I mean, been killed would say have been whites my reaction would have been totally different, totally different. There is no doubt about that. But it was just a vague feeling that this was something which was going to lead us into very serious trouble, which we had to face.

Q And then what was the culmination of that? How did that go on out? Was that still many years before you, did you continue to move after that?

A You mean move with regard...

Q Politically, in terms of you rejecting, I am forgetting the time *?sequence* exactly of you rejecting the apartheid views.

A Oh yes, no, you know it was a process which, in which the discussions at the conference, *Cottlesloe* consultation certainly played a role in my meeting then with the top leadership both African, coloured and Indian of the other denominations, realising something of the agony, of the pain *413*

Interview: Beyers Naude

A of the tensions, of the problems; much clearer awareness of which came through there than ever before because I had never been in such a consultation before.

And then to this was added the subsequent events and the very strong reaction of the part of the white DRC but for me was already the theological study which I had undertaken beforehand in which I realised that there was no biblical justification for apartheid as was presented by my church. I then realised that this would create for me personally a crisis of conscience.

Q There is a lot of talk about the ostracism, there have been things written about the ostracisation of A Son of the Soil, can you give some really examples. Was there any incident that happened that made you and your wife realise that this was a pretty difficult path? Was there any phone call or... (Oh yes,) I don't know, there were many, but were there any point that made you come... you know, if you asked a black they would talk about the first detention or the first visit from the police that made them realise this was not just fun and games, it had a price to pay, was there any point where you realised that this was going to cost you?

A There was no specific instance. There were a series of incidents; of telephone calls, of letters, of reactions of people which I realised that the price which would have to be paid would be a very serious, very severe one.

Q What were people saying? Obviously there must have been a lot of nonsense but was there anything that was any kind of cry from that sheltered background that you know so well that is articulatable?

A Oh yes, I mean what in general was said look you are a traitor to your people; you are now advocating the very things which we have always and you with us have seen to be the main threat to Afrikaner identity, to Afrikaner future, to Afrikaner security and that we feel in that sense you have betrayed everyone of the major values of Afrikaner religious and cultural thinking. That was made very clear.

Q And was any of this anything you could respond to? I mean through the years then or coming up to now, do those kinds of attacks out of such fear give you space to try and reason and try to respond? Did you ever have an experience where you were able to say, "look, let's talk about it" and make a response?

Interview: Beyers Naude

A You mean public or private?

Q Either.

A Oh no private - there were a number of such occasions where I sat down with the people concerned but it was very clear from their reactions that there was no way in which they were willing to accept my viewpoint. Even though they conceded that some of the things which I was saying was true, were, had to be considered, The general response was to say, "What you may be saying, what your convictions may be, these may have some validity for you but as far as we are concerned we are wedded to the Afrikaner concept and either you stand fully on the side of the Afrikaner and his identity, his striving, his culture, his language, his religion or otherwise you are regarded as, in very respect, a traitor."

Q I asked you before and you hadn't heard of Bram Fisher, just because of the whole traitor charge, was there a point where you came to learn who this guy was? And heard that there were other Afrikaners who, although in very, very different circumstances, had experienced this kind of thing? Or was it never an influence at all?

A His name was mentioned in course of time, then in my reading, but I had no clue who Bram Fisher was, I had no idea of what he was standing for, what he was, his views were until when I was director of the Christian Institute. A letter was written which was a letter which was sent to me to the office and was alleged to have come from Bram Fisher. It was a security police coming to try and find that letter and not finding it they made a tremendous matter of publicity of it. But apart from that I had very little awareness of who Bram Fisher was, what he was involved in and what his views were.

End of tape.