AFRICAN NATIONALISM AND RELIGIOUS INDEPENDENCY IN CAPE COLONY

A COMMENT

BY

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS
(University of Cape Town)

In two recent issues of this journal Wallace G. Mills has discussed the religious component in early African nationalism in South Africa. In his first article he claimed that 'the roots of African political and nationalist movements in the twentieth century can be found in the revivalism which emerged in 1866' in Cape Colony. In the second he asserts the the 'difficult decades' between 1890 and 1910 'saw the emergence of ...religious separatism and African nationalism', but that they were in no way linked; the contention that religious separatism was 'a precursor of and contributor to African nationalism... is, as far as South Africa is concerned, quite erroneous.'

In making this latter assertion, Mills believed himself to be challenging the view that religious separatism was 'the first manifestation of “secondary resistance” at the Cape.' For this view he cites a seminar paper I wrote in 1969 in which, wrongly according to Mills, I looked to religious independency for some of the roots of twentieth century African nationalism in South Africa. Aware, however, that most separatist churches have in the twentieth century adopted an apolitical or anti-political stance, I spoke of religious separatism developing 'into a rival channel for black aspirations in the twentieth century' and pointed out that most Christians who occupied positions of leadership

in the nationalist political organization were members of the mission, not separatist churches. Because I did not see the relationship between religious separatism and African nationalism as clear-cut and unambiguous, especially in the early years, Mills writes: 'Saunders obviously found it an enigma'. To Mills the whole thing is simple: the problem of the relationship between separatism and nationalism is 'soon solved' if it is realized that 'the advent of religious separatism in South Africa marked the arrival of Christian premillenarianism'. There is no link with nationalism because from the beginning the independent churches were pietistic and other-worldly; seeing no hope of improving the lot of Africans in this world, they turned their attentions to the world to come. Separatist churches have, he writes, 'beliefs and practices which are compatible only with a premillennialist eschatology'. This is so 'almost without exception' and those leaders of independent churches who had anything to do with politics were in that 'unusual, atypical'.

As evidence that the early separatist leaders were anti politics, Mills merely cites the example of the Rev. Pambani Mzimba, referring to a well-publicised but somewhat ambiguous speech Mzimba made twelve years before his secession from the Presbyterian Church, despite the fact that Mzimba himself later participated in political activity after his secession. Nehemiah Tile's Thembu Church, where religion and politics were closely intertwined, is totally ignored. Shula Marks has pointed out that in Natal perhaps as many Ethiopians participated in the Bambatha rebellion in 1906 as stayed out of it. The Rev. Henry Reed Ngcayiya, a founder member of the South African Native National Congress in 1912 and a member of its national executive, headed an Ethiopian Church which in 1919 claimed 20,000 members. He was not the only member of an independent church to serve on the


4 Mills, Fork in the Road, 57 note 20 and 57-59.

5 Saunders, Tile and the Thembu Church, passim.
