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Charles Villa-Vicencio. *The Spirit of Freedom: South African Leaders on Religion and Politics.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996. xxxii + 301 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20045-6; $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20044-9.

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The Spirit of Freedom

History books tend to land with a dry thump on one's desk. This one arrived in my office singing hymns.

Charles Villa-Vicencio was professor of religion and society at the University of Cape Town. He is now part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

His present book, he says, "is about people driven towards freedom. It is about the unquenchable, universal will to be free that resides deep within the human soul.... The spirit that energises people so driven, blows widely. It refuses to be confined to any narrow ideological constraints" (p. xxvi).

The book looks at the role of religion in the lives of several prominent people who were involved at various times in the struggle against apartheid, including both figures who are living and those already dead, some who are involved in religion but mostly those who are involved in politics in one way or another.

Talk to people about religion, Villa-Vicencio says, "and their value systems come tumbling out. To the extent that religion is about the quest to be fully human, this is to be expected" (p. xxix).

The list of people whom Villa-Vicencio interviewed looks not unlike a who's who of the liberation struggle:

Neville Alexander, Ray Alexander, Franz Auerbach, Cheryl Carolus, Frank Chicane, Sheena Duncan, Ela Gandhi, Nadine Gordimer, Chris Hani, Trevor Huddleston, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Fatima Meer, Stanley Mogoba, Ruth Mompati, Itumeleng Mosala, Beyers Naude, Ebrahim Rasool, Albertina Sisulu, Joe Slovo, Desmond Tutu

It is a book about politics, but it is mostly about the human spirit. Villa-Vicencio explores those intangible impulses that form the essence of being. Some call it philosophy but most of those interviewed have no shame in declaring it their religion.

The author weaves a fascinating picture of each subject, based on interviews that he then plaits into a clever mixture of narrative and self-exposition. It looks at what each individual did but, more important, at what forces drove them and at what cost.

It is not possible in the space of a simple review to examine each and every entry. I am also aware that I am dealing here with a book that is of literary merit and that my hesitating efforts to capture its essence might fail dismally.

I shall therefore let Villa-Vicencio speak for himself, so that the reader may be the judge of his writing. Even then, however, be aware that these passages are some of those which gripped me. There are many more. Read the book for yourself.

Of Cheryl Carolus (politician), he writes:

"For me religion is an important component of human spirituality. It involves a wrestling with the question of life. It is an exercise in redefining yourself for yourself, both as a human being and as part of the greater created order. It involves discovering the greatness of humanity, knowing that you can make a difference, while realising how small you are in relation to the total order of things. When you understand that balance, I think you are beginning to take your rightful place in society" (p. 56).

Of Frank Chicane (churchman), he writes:

[He] believes religion and politics are inherently linked. "The pendulum of Christianity swings between devotion to God and devotion to those who suffer. It has to do with the love of God and the love of neighbour. It concerns spiritual empowerment and political engagement. To be a Christian is to be engaged in struggle," says Chicane.... "Struggle is the necessary and logical outcome of all that I believe. It is a direct consequence of my devotion to God. It is the enactment of my theology. Without it, all that I believe and teach would be

without integrity" (p. 63).

Of Chris Hani (assassinated Communist Party leader), he says:

Hani enjoys speaking about his early fascination with religion. "I left my religious home for reasons that I continue to think have been valid. The Church failed to live up to its own theology. My task was not to try and reform the Church. If I thought it was, I would presumably have been a priest. It was rather to share in the struggle of our people for the very dignity of which the Bible speaks" (p. 129).

Of Nelson Mandela (State President), he writes:

Mandela talks about prison: "Work on the island was very demanding, but it had its own sense of joy. The rock formations, the sea, the wind, the fresh air, and the bird life; that were part of the island, kept us going. You know, just to look at the sea and to consider its width and sometimes to test its depth along the edges of the island … was for me more than a physical experience. Isolated from society, I was able to become one with nature. I watched the tides come in and go out. There was the movement of ships. I considered the rock formations. I enjoyed the elements even when they were harsh" (p. 149).

Of Joe Slovo (Communist Party leader), he writes:

He argues that humanity has projected "into the heavens" what it has not been able to accomplish on earth. The notion of a perfect God and a world to come within which poverty and tyranny are defeated, is for Slovo a manifestation of the sense of human powerlessness that has emerged over the millenniums. "What Marxism has done is take the human longing for the perfect society and incorporate it into a socialist vision. It turns an otherworldy, religious notion into a political programme. Sure there are weaknesses, sometimes called sinful dimensions, to the human character such as greed and the lust for power. That is partly why democracy is so important. It is an important antidote against tyranny, a dangerous possibility that lies deep within the human spirit. But I also believe in the greatness of the human spirit, the ability of humanity to build a paradise on earth, at least in the sense of putting together a society that is a vast improvement on what is seen in either the capitalist world or the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" (pp. 268-69).

Of Albertina Sisulu (ANC Women's League), he writes:

But she is optimistic about future rights for women, precisely because of the important role women have played in the struggle over the years. "Women have suffered as much, and probably more, than men over the years. A woman is often a mother, and it is a painful thing, perhaps the most painful thing in the world, for a mother to see her child suffer–to see her child being killed. Throughout our struggle men, women and children have died alongside each other. Yet, in more recent years our children have paid a price far in excess of anything that any mother can reasonably accept.… As mothers, we were compelled to demand: 'Kill us if you must, but in God's name leave our children alone"' (p. 257).

Of Desmond Tutu (Archbishop), he writes:

"We talk about communism. 'Some suggest that I am anti communist,' Tutu observes. 'That is not the case. My objection is essentially theological. Dialectic materialism, on which communism is based, is essentially an atheist philosophy.' He accepts that there are those who see a space for God within this philosophy and that there are Christians who belong to the South African Communist Party. His concern is, however, that communism fails to locate God at the centre of history. 'Communism places too much trust and confidence in human beings. For people to be good and just, they need to be exposed to the grace and goodness of God. Dialectical materialism does not do this and that, in a nutshell, is my problem with communism"' (pp. 278-79).

This is not a book that needs be read from cover to cover. It is one that can lie next to the bed, to be read occasionally to get a new insight, to refresh one's being. It is mostly about South African political leaders, and indeed one learns a great deal about what they did and what drove them to do it. But it is also essentially a book about the human soul and the ultimate goodness that emanates therefrom.

It is well worth the price of purchase.

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