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**WHY DID IT HAPPEN? RELIGIOUS AND LAY  
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FLU EPIDEMIC OF 1918 IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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To the historian great human disasters can be like searchlights on a dark night — they can pick out important features which would otherwise remain invisible to the beholder. Contemporary attempts to explain such disasters can provide unparalleled insights into prevailing ideas about the fundamental question of why evil happens in the world and thus lay bare key elements in the 'mentalité' of the population. However crude or ill-founded such explanations might be, they can furnish valuable and sometimes unique insights into the contemporary mind — a person's explanation of disaster can reveal as much about him or her as about the disaster. 'Under the first impact of disaster', notes an authority on millenarianism, 'the victims almost instinctively seek to explain their predicament in terms of pre-existing beliefs.'<sup>1</sup> In this response lies an unusual opportunity to plumb the bases of attitudes and beliefs which, under normal conditions, remain unarticulated or hidden. In this sense, the Spanish 'flu epidemic of 1918 was, like the Black Death, 'a stimulus, . . . which exposed the nerve system of . . . society'.<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish Influenza epidemic was the worst natural disaster in South African history. In little over 6 weeks in October - November 1918 some 300,000 South Africans (about 4-5% of the total population) perished as a result of it.<sup>3</sup>

In this article a range of popular contemporary explanations of it, both religious and lay, will be examined. Thereafter, some attempt will be made to suggest what these imply about wider attitudes and beliefs in early 20th Century South Africa.

At the outset a word about sources is necessary too. This article is based on those opinions which were recorded at the time, together with a large but random collection of views gathered by interview and letter from survivors over sixty years later. These sources disproportionately reflect White male opinion.

As was its wont in times of disaster, organized religion gave the lead to much popular thinking on the causes of the epidemic. As Weber argued: man is at his most religious in situations in which the powerlessness, contingency and material insecurity of human existence are most acutely apparent.<sup>4</sup> Religious opinion on why the epidemic occurred

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1. M. Barkun: *Disaster and the Millenium* (New Haven and London, 1974), p.79.
  2. M.W. Dols: 'The Comparative Communal Responses to the Black Death in Muslim and Christian Societies' in *Viator*, vol. 5 (1974), p.275.
  3. H. Phillips: 'Black October: The Impact of the Spanish Influenza Epidemic of 1918 on South Africa' (Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, UCT, 1984), ch: 9.
  4. A.D. Gilbert: *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (London and New York, 1976), p.186.

was not uniform, however. Even within a single denomination, official views varied. This was most often the case among English-speaking denominations, least so among the three Afrikaans churches. Lay opinion couched in theological terms generally followed the same pattern.

It is possible to group these lay and religious explanations into four broad categories:

- i) those which attributed the epidemic to God's direct action, either as punishment or to further some divine purpose;
- ii) those which attributed it to human neglect of social conditions (in some cases God was felt to have an indirect role in this);
- iii) those which attributed it to deliberate action by malevolent individuals or groups; and
- iv) those which saw it as the unintended result of the fighting on the Western Front.

The following sections outline these explanations at greater length and try to throw light on their origin and implications, as well as what they reveal about the world-views of South Africans in 1918.

(i) **God's direct action**

Among Christian denominations, the three Afrikaans churches in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church (the D.R.C.), the Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk, were least in doubt as to the epidemic's origin. 'De pestilentie was van God afkomstig', asserted the D.R.C.'s **De Kerkbode**. Germs were merely the immediate cause; the First Cause was God.<sup>5</sup> Did the plague of lice visited on Pharaoh's Egypt not demonstrate how God could transform 'de nietigste dingen in de natuur' into a potent instrument of divine will? Was this not exactly what He had done to the influenza germ, it enquired.<sup>6</sup> Equally, the means whereby the germs had reached the country was of secondary importance. Senator A.D.W. Wolmarans, a founding father of the Hervormde Kerk, asked in his 'Open Brief' to fellow Christians:

'Is 't ons niet helder en klaar dat deze plaag niet is een blote toeval, tot ons overgebracht door Kleurlingen en troepen uit Vlaanderen of Oost-Afrika, maar in rade Gods om Zijn volk en al de volkeren der aarde tot schuldbelijdenis te brengen?'<sup>7</sup>

To seek the cause in human action, remarked the Gereformeerde Kerk's **Het Kerkblad**, was as misguided as the dog which bites the stone thrown at it, 'zonder te merken op hem die de werper is'.<sup>8</sup> There were no two ways about it, ds. J.D. Kestell, the Moderator of the Orange Free State D.R.C., told his congregation — it was a 'Godsbezoeking'.<sup>9</sup>

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5. **De Kerkbode**, 17/10/1918, p.992.

6. **De Kerkbode**, 7/11/1918, p.1057.

7. **De Burger**, 21/10/1918, p.2. Contemporaries suspected — with good reason — that the epidemic had been brought to the Union by returning troops.

8. **Het Kerkblad**, 1/11/1918, p.1.

9. Institute for Contemporary History, University of the OFS: PV 153 (Kestell Collection), file 3/1/4/30 (Preke 1918), Document 14/354 — 'Schets' for sermon, 24/11/1918.

Other Christian denominations were not as sure. A few, highly-placed Anglican clerics did speak in a similar vein,<sup>10</sup> but as the next section of this article shows, the weight of official Anglican opinion in South Africa inclined away from seeing God's deliberate hand in the epidemic. Only the **Congregationalist**, the organ of the Congregational Union, was unequivocal in its conclusion that the 'flu was 'of God',<sup>11</sup> and even then it reversed this view four months later.<sup>12</sup>

Of the other universalist religions, such scanty evidence as does exist suggests that Hindus saw the epidemic as an indication of divine wrath,<sup>13</sup> while Muslims seem to have accepted it unquestioningly as the 'Takdir [Will] of Allah'.<sup>14</sup> The leading Jewish minister in Cape Town, Rev. A.P. Bender, was as unwilling to probe, feeling that it was useless to speculate about causes and origins. 'Let us frankly confess that such knowledge is too wonderful for us', he told a memorial service for 'flu victims; 'it is too high for us to attain unto it'.<sup>15</sup>

Among laymen, however, there was no shortage of those who were convinced that God had sent the epidemic. In the light of the view of the Afrikaans churches, it is not surprising that this opinion was particularly common in the columns of Dutch/Afrikaans newspapers and periodicals. A country correspondent of **De Vriend des Volks** voiced what was in the minds of many when he solemnly warned:

'Zoeken wij tog geen tweederlei oorzaak als de Hand des Almagtige ons slaat en alzo doende zijn woord in vervulling brengt.'<sup>16</sup>

It is noticeable too, that when the epidemic was debated in the House of Assembly, it was only Afrikaner M.L.A.s (both Government and Opposition) who expressed such a view.<sup>17</sup>

To the historian, the most valuable aspect of these explanations is that not only did they identify God as the source of the epidemic, but they also tried to explain why He had sent it. In nearly every case it was interpreted as punishment for sin — a bout of soul-searching seems a common concomitant of disaster and an ideal opportunity for

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10. **The News-letter**, November 1918, Statement by Dean of Grahamstown; **Kimberley and Kuruman Diocesan Magazine**, no. 29, p.5; **Springs Parish Messenger**, November 1918, Article titled 'The Wider Aspect'.
  11. **The Congregationalist**, November-December 1918, p.3.
  12. **The Congregationalist**, March 1919, p.1.
  13. Library of Parliament, Cape Town: Influenza Epidemic Commission Evidence (hereafter cited as IEC), vol. 1, file 3: Evidence by Mr Nayanah, p.31; **Diamond Fields Advertiser**, 3/12/1918, p.7.
  14. Interview with Mr. A. Bava. (Transcripts of all interviews cited in this article are in the author's possession.) In his paper on the reactions of Cape Muslims to the smallpox epidemics of the 19th Century, Achmat Davids stresses that to them disease was quite simply an affliction imposed by God. He does not suggest that they speculated on why He had sent it. (A. Davids: 'The Revolt of the Malays' in C. Saunders et al. (eds.): **Studies in the History of Cape Town**, vol. 5 (Cape Town, 1984), pp.50n, 61, 65-66.)
  15. **In Memoriam. Memorial Service for Members of the Jewish Community who died during the Epidemic. Held in the Great Synagogue, Cape Town, 24/11/1918** (Cape Town, 1918), p.6. Nevertheless, some members of Bender's congregation fasted during the epidemic, in the hope that this would save them from what they believed had been sent as a punishment for sin (Interview with Mrs. J. Stern).
  16. **De Vriend des Volks**, 18/11/1918, Article titled 'Siekte en Dood — Reitz'.
  17. **Debates of the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa as reported in the Cape Times**, vol. 4, p.35, col. 2; p. 45, col. 1; p.51, cols. 1, 3.

those in positions of authority to denounce a range of practices of which they disapprove strongly.<sup>18</sup> A catalogue of these sins provides an indication of those actions which some South Africans held to be so evil as to warrant God's direct punishment. These highlight part of what underlay much contemporary disquiet, social anxiety and even guilt, especially among Afrikaners. They also help to identify what particular groups perceived as the greatest threats to them and they assist in the definition of prevailing conceptions of God by setting out what He was believed to find deserving of punishment.

Apart from those explanations which referred to sin in general terms only, the sins mentioned can be grouped under four headings: social and moral; specifically religious; political; and those pertaining to World War I.

The social and moral sins specified differ little from those identified many times before (and since) in Christian circles. They included immorality,<sup>19</sup> dishonesty,<sup>20</sup> selfishness,<sup>21</sup> shameless behaviour,<sup>22</sup> drunkenness,<sup>23</sup> avarice,<sup>24</sup> worldliness and materialism.<sup>25</sup> In particular, **De Burger** pointed out how the presence of thousands of visiting troops had seriously increased immorality in the country's ports.<sup>26</sup> The general moral condition was low, especially — as one dominee noted in **De Kerkbode**<sup>27</sup> — among the young. Since it was this very group that had been hardest hit by the 'flu, his implication was clear.

For the most part, the sins mentioned with regard to religious life were also ones which had long been condemned by the Christian Church: straying from God,<sup>28</sup> unrighteous-

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18. P. Slack: 'Disease and the social historian' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 8/3/1974, p.234.
  19. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1032; 7/11/1918, p.1057; 23/1/1919, p.88; **De Burger**, 7/11/1918, p.3; **Handelingen van de 12de Synode der N.H. of G.K. van Zuid Afrika, 1919**, p.255.
  20. **De Kerkbode**, 24/10/1918, p.1012; 23/1/1919, p.88.
  21. **De Kerkbode**, 7/11/1918, p.1057; **The News-letter**, November 1918, Statement by Dean of Grahamstown; **Springs Parish Messenger**, November 1918, Article titled 'The Wider Aspect'.
  22. **Handelingen van de 12de Synode . . . 1919**, p.255.
  23. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1032; 7/11/1918, p.1057; 23/1/1919, p.88.
  24. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1032; 7/11/1918, p.1057; **The Star**, 24/10/1918, p.11 (Letter from unidentified correspondent).
  25. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1032; 7/11/1918, p.1057; 26/12/1918, p.1242; 23/1/1919, p.88; **De Christelike Strever**, December 1918, p.12; **De Burger**, 22/10/1918, Editorial; **Die Volksblad**, 3/12/1918, Lindley Report.
  26. **De Burger**, 22/10/1918, Editorial; 31/10/1918, Editorial.
  27. **De Kerkbode**, 23/1/1919, p.88.
  28. **De Kerkbode**, 24/10/1918, p.1006; **De Wekker**, November 1918, p.1; **Die Ebenezer**, 1/11/1918, p.15; **De Koningsbode**, November-December 1918, p.130; **De Burger**, 19/11/1918, p.6 (Letter from 'Een Petrusviller'); 25/11/1918, p.4 (Letter from K.B.); **Die Volksblad**, 26/11/1918, (Letter from H.B. de Witt); 3/12/1918, (Lindley report).

ness,<sup>29</sup> indifference, neglect and laxity,<sup>30</sup> unbelief and superstition,<sup>31</sup> hubris,<sup>32</sup> perfunctoriness in worship,<sup>33</sup> blasphemy,<sup>34</sup> not attending Church<sup>35</sup> and desecrating the Sabbath.<sup>36</sup> 'Worshipping science' was something new, however. To **De Kerkbode** the various 'scientific' explanations which had been advanced to account for the epidemic were classic examples of the vanity and conceit which arose when human beings thought they knew better than God and placed Science above Him. 'Nu spreekt men van kiemen en vuile straten en achterbuurten,' it lamented, 'en het is uit de mode en onwetenschappelijk om van zonden te spreken'. God, it went on, demanded

'dat wij geen andere goden vóór Zijn aangezicht hebben zullen, en o, wat voor goden hebben de menschenkinderen, die zij dienen en waarvoor zij leven! In de laatste tijden, zegt ons de Apostel, zal de antichrist er zijn en hij zal in Gods tempel zitten en als God zich laten aanbidden. De laatste tijden zijn op ons, en de mensch met zijn vernuft en wetenschap en materialisme verheft zich als 't doel van zijn bestaan. Hijzelf is zijn God. Wij leven voor onszelven, en gehoorzamen alleen ons gevoel en onze gedachten en onzen wil.'<sup>37</sup>

Given the 'traditional' character of all the above sins save the last, it is not surprising that they were regarded as punishable by God. Less predictable was the conclusion that the division in Afrikaner ranks since the South African Party split and the Rebellion was a reason for divine wrath. This suggests a deeply-felt unease about this state of affairs which worried many Afrikaners who felt such a situation should not exist. 'Voorwaar ons land gaan swaar geteister onder die vele plaë', sighed a correspondent in **De Burger**, 'maar ook geen wonder, want hoe heers die bitterheid en verdeeldheid nie onder ons

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29. **De Volkstem**, 8/11/1918, p.6 (Letter from D.J. van der Merwe); **Springs Parish Messenger**, November 1918, Article titled 'The Wider Aspect'.
  30. **De Kerkbode**, 24/10/1918, p.1012; 31/10/1918, pp.1031-2; 7/11/1918, p.1057; 12/12/1918, p.1191; 26/12/1918, p.1242; **De Christelike Strever**, November 1918, pp.2, 8; December 1918, p.12; **Gereformeerd Maandblad**, November 1918, p.148; **De Burger**, 22/10/1918, Editorial; 24/10/1918, p.4 (Letter from J.H. Hanekom); 31/10/1918, Editorial; 25/11/1918, p.4 (Letter from K.B.); **Die Volksblad**, 3/12/1918, p.2; **The Star**, 24/10/1918, p.11 (Letter from unidentified correspondent); **Springs Parish Messenger**, November 1918, Article titled 'The Wider Aspect'.
  31. **De Kerkbode**, 7/11/1918, p.1057.
  32. **De Kerkbode**, 7/11/1918, p.1057; **De Christelike Strever**, November 1918, p.2; December 1918, p.7; **De Goede Hoop**, 15/1/1919, p.269; **Die Volksblad**, 3/12/1918, p.2; **De Koningsbode**, November-December 1918, p.108; **Die Huisgenoot**, February 1919, p.644.
  33. **De Kerkbode**, 21/11/1918, pp.1110-1111; **De Burger**, 22/10/1918, Editorial; **Ons Vaderland**, 19/11/1918, p.5 (Letter from H.F. Meyer).
  34. **De Vriend des Volks**, 21/11/1918, Article entitled 'De Schrik Des Heeren'.
  35. **De Kerkbode**, 7/11/1918, p.1057; **De Christelike Strever**, December 1918, p.12. (Letter from 'Jong Afrikaner'); **Die Volksblad**, 3/12/1918, p.2.
  36. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1032; 7/11/1918, p.1057; **De Christelike Strever**, December 1918, p.12; **Ons Vaderland**, 1/11/1918, p.4 (Letter from A.F.); **Onze Courant**, 7/11/1918, p.2 (Letter from 'Een Mede Zondaar').
  37. **De Kerkbode**, 17/10/1918, pp.992-3.

volk, en wie sal ontken dat ons die kastijding verdien?<sup>38</sup> **De Kerkbode** was shocked at how:

'Men verwenscht en belastert en vervloekt elkaar! Men oordeelt en veroordeelt en graaft voor elkender kuilen! Men schrijft, men spreekt en men heeft de drukpers om de haat te vermeerderen. Zou dat alles niet tot God roepen?'<sup>39</sup>

Illustrating this 'broedertwis' all too clearly, two letters to the Nationalist **Ons Vaderland** suggested that, just as Israel had been punished when it had had a wicked ruler, so South Africa had to pay for its present shameful leaders. However, added the writers, a remedy lay close to hand — the next general election.<sup>40</sup>

Nor was this bitter animosity confined to politics alone — it had been allowed to penetrate the church and daily life too.<sup>41</sup> It was as chastisement for all this dissension, warned some, that the epidemic had been sent.<sup>42</sup> General Botha, the Prime Minister, went even further: in his view it was not merely the rancour among Afrikaners which was being punished, but also the discord between English and Afrikaans South Africans. He told reporters that he believed that:

'this visitation will prove to be one of the means sent by God in order to sober us by punishment; to clear out misunderstanding, so that everything may lead along the road of greater affection, tolerance, co-operation, and a truly united national existence in matters spiritual as well as political'.<sup>43</sup>

The fourth type of sin which was believed to have aroused God's anger related to World War I. Here the particular nature of the sin varied according to the eye of the beholder. Some D.R.C. ministers saw the epidemic as a rebuke to those who arrogantly thought that, with all his new weapons, man had perfected the ability to kill. 'Is 't niet als of de Alwetende spot met al de moordtuigen door een verzondigde wetenschap uitgedacht!' asked the chairman of the joint Raad der Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerken in Zuid-Afrika. 'De mensch heeft zijne duizenden verslagen, maar God Zijne tien duizenden!'<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, a National Party M.L.A., Rev. E.J.J. van der Horst, saw the epidemic as God's lesson that 'we should not interfere in wars which did not concern

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38. **De Burger**, 10/12/1918, p.3.

39. **De Kerkbode**, 17/10/1918, p.993.

40. **Ons Vaderland**, 3/12/1918, p.6 (Letter from A. Vecht who was N.P. Secretary in Lydenburg); 19/11/1918, p.3 (Letter from O.T. van Niekerk).

41. **De Burger**, 19/11/1918, p.6 (Letter from 'Een Petrusviller'); 25/11/1918, p.4 (Letter from K.B.); **De Vriend des Volks**, 16/12/1918, Fouriesburg report.

42. **De Burger**, 24/10/1918, p.4 (Letter from J.H. Hanekom); 7/11/1918, p.3; **De Volkstem** 29/11/1918, p.5 (Letter from W. Hattingh); **De Goede Hoop**, 15/11/1918, pp.163-4; **De Kerkbode**, 17/10/1918, p.994; 31/10/1918, pp.1032-1034; 7/11/1918, p.1057; **De Christelike Strever**, December 1918, p.7; **Die Huisgenoot**, February 1919, p.644.

43. **Cape Times**, 25/11/1918, p.7.

44. **Handelingen van de Zeste Vergadering van den Raad der Ned. Geref. Kerken in Zuid Afrika**, 1919, p.37. For a similar opinion, see Collier Collection: Letter from J. Sperber, 11/5/1972. (Copies of all South African letters in the Collier Collection are in the author's possession).

us'.<sup>45</sup> The pro-National Party **Onze Courant** was even more specific: in its blind 'oorlogsugtigheid', it wrote, the Government had turned its back on basic Christian precepts and the country's real interests and ridden roughshod over 'die beginsel van nasionaliteite, 'n instelling van die Opperwese'. As a result, 'Vandaag [sic] woed die pestilensie, die uitvloeisel van die oorlog en hierheen gebreng deur die oorlogmakers, onder ons volk. Dit is Gods oordeel.'<sup>46</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, one super-patriotic Anglican clergyman believed that the 'flu epidemic was a prompting by God to be more energetic in the cause of righteousness and make bigger sacrifices 'to rescue the world from the brutality of the Hun'.<sup>47</sup>

From a rather different perspective, other South Africans felt that perhaps the epidemic was a divine means of ending the devastating war. 'Maybe He sent it to make England and Germany stop fighting and killing', reflected an elderly survivor years later, adding corroboratively, 'and they did soon afterwards!'<sup>48</sup>

To not a few people the coincidence of the devastating epidemic and this terrible war was more than chance — it was a sign of deeper things afoot. **De Kerkbode** was not alone when it made this very point:

'Indien 't aardbevingen alleen waren, of indien 't hongersnood alleen was, of oorlog alleen, of een pestziekte alleen — we zouden misschien nog recht gehad hebben te twifelen. Doch al deze dingen tegelijk hun verschijsning makende! En in zulk een schriklijken graad! En de gaansche wereld erin betrokken! Wie durft nu nog twifelen? Er is iets aan 't komen. Ja, Jezus is aan 't komen . . . Verklaar de bijzonderheden van Christus wederkomst zoaals gij wilt, dit kunt gij niet ontkennen, deze pestilentie is één van de vingerwijzingen daarheen.'<sup>49</sup>

**Het Kerkblad** identified the 'flu epidemic as the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, Death,<sup>50</sup> while others, both inside and outside the church, cited biblical passages in support of their contention that this pestilence heralded the Second Coming.<sup>51</sup> 'Maranatha! de here komt' mag wel grondtoon zijn van onze overdenkingen in deze tijd', declared a distinguished D.R.C. theologian.<sup>52</sup>

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45. **Debates of the House of Assembly . . . as reported in the Cape Times**, vol. 4, p.51, col. 3.

46. **Onze Courant**, 4/11/1918, Editorial.

47. **Springs Parish Messenger**, November 1918, Article entitled 'The Wider Aspect'.

48. Interview with Mrs. G. Gafiel-Cader. See too Collier Collection: Letter from Mr. F. Appolis, May 1972.

49. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, pp.1032-33.

50. **Het Kerkblad**, 15/10/1918, pp.1-2.

51. **De Christelike Strever**, December 1918, p.4; April 1919, p.2; **De Koningsbode**, November-December 1918, p.108; **Genade en Waarheid**, January 1919, p.2; **Ons Vaderland**, 1/11/1918, p.2 (Letter from J. van Zanten); 19/11/1918, p.3 (Letter from F.H. Geyser); **De Huisvriend**, 17/11/1918, p.129; 1/12/1918, p.137; 8/12/1918, p.141; Letter from Dr. C.F. Juritz to Rev. John Kingon, 3/11/1918 (copy in author's possession).

52. **Gereformeerd Maandblad**, November 1918, p.160.

For Johanna Brandt, an Afrikaner visionary who, in 1916, had predicted a great plague as the prelude to the Millennium,<sup>53</sup> the influenza epidemic was incontrovertible proof of the accuracy of her prophecy. To all those who had scoffed at her then, it was an unanswerable reply. Early in November 1918 she pointed this out in a letter to the press:

'Vervuld is de woord dat die jaar 1918 die Keerpunt sou wees in die geskiedenis van die wereld, vervuld deur die uitsending van die Boodskap van Waarskuwing, Genade en Verlossing, en deur die uitgieting van die eerste van die sewe plage waarin die toorn Gods geëindig sal wees.'<sup>54</sup>

Lengthy extracts from this letter were quoted in newspaper advertisements which urged the public to buy a copy of the new edition of her, **Die Millennium**, 'voor dit te laat is'.<sup>55</sup>

But, she added, the 'flu was only 'Die Begin Der Smarte . . . Dit is maar een klein voorloper van die plage en pestilensies waarin die mense hulle tonge sal kauw van pyn (Openb. 16 vs 10, 11).'<sup>56</sup> Much worse was to follow before Christ returned to live among the righteous few who had survived: on 7 December even more people would die than had succumbed in the influenza epidemic.<sup>57</sup> This prediction, along with gruesome stories about the 'Black Plague' in Cape Town, prompted many parents to wire their children studying at Stellenbosch to return home at once.<sup>58</sup> In the event, the only unusual natural occurrence in the first week of December was a partial eclipse of the sun, late on the 3rd.<sup>59</sup>

Outside Afrikaner circles, millenarian interpretations seem to have been far less common. Apart from one reference by a Congregationalist deacon,<sup>60</sup> other churches appear to have shunned such explicitly apocalyptic explanations, though a quarterly titled **The Midnight Cry**, a magazine 'devoted to Evangelism and . . . Glorious Hope of the Return of the Lord Jesus Christ', did start publication in Johannesburg early in 1919, under the editorship of the Anglican Rev. Ernest Baker.<sup>61</sup> It was joined in 1920 by ds. A.G. du Toit's **Ziet Hij Komt!**

There is reason to believe that among African Christians the epidemic also aroused millenarian ideas — for instance, the movement in the Ciskei led by the prophetess

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53. J. Brandt: **The Millennium — A Prophetic Forecast** (n.p., 1918). According to the preface of the English version, this booklet was to appear in Dutch, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Sesuto, Zulu, German, French and Russian. On Johanna Brandt, see **Dictionary of South African Biography**, vol. IV (Durban and Pretoria, 1981), p.55. 'Siener' van Rensburg, the seer who made his name during the Anglo-Boer War, is also reputed to have predicted the 'flu epidemic, but without the millenarian connotations (S. Botha: **Profeet en Krygsman — Die Lewensverhaal van Siener van Rensburg** (Johannesburg, 1940), pp.59-60, 98-9). An African prophet, Amos Mbata, is said to have foretold the epidemic too (B. Sundkler: **Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists** (London, 1976), p.60); whether the context was millenarian or not is not indicated.
  54. **De Noord-Westelyke Nationalist**, 22/11/1918.
  55. **Die Volksblad**, 22/11/1918.
  56. **De Noord-Westelyke Nationalist**, 22/11/1918.
  57. **Die Ebenezer**, 1/12/1918, p.22; **The Cape**, 22/11/1918, p.3.
  58. **The Cape**, 22/11/1918, p.3.
  59. **The Star**, 3/12/1918, p.9.
  60. **The Congregationalist**, November-December 1918, p.24.
  61. Unfortunately, neither the first nor the second number of this journal has survived in library collections in South Africa.

Nonteta<sup>62</sup> — but a dearth of documentation makes a fuller statement difficult. What is likely, however, is that the epidemic was one of several natural disasters and diseases which gained Enoch Mgijima's millenarian Israelite movement a large following.<sup>63</sup> It was followers of Mgijima who were massacred at Bulhoek in 1921.

(ii) **Human neglect of social conditions**

The second broad category of popular explanations attributed the decimation caused by the epidemic to what **The Friend** described as 'man's disregard of the Divine or Natural laws of health and cleanliness'.<sup>64</sup> In particular, the belief was widely expressed that, as one reporter put it, '... we are reaping the consequences of allowing slums in our midst. These slums are a hot-bed of infection ...'.<sup>65</sup> Much prominence was given by the press to accounts of the dank, insanitary and overcrowded living conditions encountered by relief-workers in their visits to slum areas. In most cases these conditions were reported as being closely associated with a heavy incidence of the 'flu'.<sup>66</sup> Herein lay the basis of this popular explanation of the deadly effect of the epidemic, if not of its origin. The composer, W.H. Bell, was one of many laymen to hold a view that

'We have forgotten the great law, a law of Nature as well as of Ethics, that we are our brother's keeper, and Nature has turned round, as she always will, and given us a sound trashing for our neglect of her laws.'<sup>67</sup>

Especially in English-speaking business and professional circles, such views were common, reflecting exposure to current scientific ideas and a belief in individual responsibility.<sup>68</sup> Urban slums and poor medical organisation had provided 'great scope to the spread of disease', declared the organ of South African industry, **Industrial South Africa**. Such conditions were

'the natural consequences of neglecting the laws of Nature and the precepts of Science. It is useless shutting our eyes to the blame which attaches to each of us as an individual unit of the community ... No human means must be neglected to prevent dread disease from finding a foothold in our country. It is to be remembered that we live in the 20th century, the age of science and enlightenment.'<sup>69</sup>

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62. R.R. Edgar: *The Fifth Seal: Enoch Mgijima, the Israelites and the Bulhoek Massacre, 1921* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, 1977), pp.154-5. Edgar refers to another millenarian movement with Ylu connections on p.152.
63. *Ibid.*, pp.55-56.
64. **The Friend**, 8/11/1918, Editorial.
65. **The Star**, 11/10/1918.
66. See Phillips: 'Black October', ch. 2, p.66, ch. 3, p.108 and ch. 4, p.136.
67. **The Cape**, 1/11/1918, p.13.
68. On the development of this viewpoint in Britain, see A.D. Gilbert: **The Making of Post-Christian Britain** (London and New York, 1980), pp.58-61, 64; and A. Wohl: **Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain** (London, 1983), p.6.
69. **Industrial South Africa**, November 1918, p.520.

Similar ideas were at the core of the explanations offered by most clergymen of English-speaking denominations. Writing to a friend in England, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town complained:

'People speak of it [the epidemic] as an "Act of God", a legal phrase, I know, but it seems to me to put the matter into an altogether wrong light. The Enemy who sows tares certainly found a congenial soil in the slums here.'<sup>70</sup>

An Anglican minister on the Rand was more explicit when he identified the cause of the epidemic as 'man-made — or devil-made if you like, but through the agency of man; not God-made as so many seem to think'.<sup>71</sup> Insofar as there was an official Anglican viewpoint on the epidemic, it was expounded by the Bishop of George whose article on this subject in his diocesan magazine was reprinted by the national **Church Chronicle**. He made it clear that he did 'not believe . . . that God has sent the influenza because He is angry with us, and has determined to punish us'. The reason for the devastating effect of the epidemic lay in the fact that

'certain conditions . . . laid down by the Creator as necessary to our health, have been neglected, wilfully, it may be, or, what is more likely, in ignorance . . . We know already that fresh air, cleanliness, nourishment, are our allies in contending with this disease, and that on the other hand, foul air, dirt, poor and insufficient food, are enemies strongly entrenched in the households of thousands of people in this country . . . [W]e who tolerate such conditions are guilty before God and humanity . . .'<sup>72</sup>

It was within such a framework that ministers of other English-speaking denominations explained the epidemic too, although they differed as to the extent of God's involvement. Presbyterians hinted at a more direct role by God in punishing man's neglect;<sup>73</sup> the **South African Baptist** did not refer to Him at all in its account.<sup>74</sup> The **Catholic Magazine**, after months of vacillation, eventually attributed the outbreak to an undefined 'Nature',<sup>75</sup> while the **Congregationalist** finally turned its back on its initial stance<sup>76</sup> and heartily endorsed an article emphasising that 'ignorance and neglect, not God, are responsible for disease'.<sup>77</sup> Rev. John Dube, an American Board Mission Church Congregationalist,<sup>78</sup> went further, asserting that the 'flu was the natural result, permitted by God, of a

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70. Witwatersrand University Library, Historical and Literary Papers Division: AB 186 (Archbishop W.M. Carter Letters), Carter to Lord Wenlock, All Saints Day, 1918.

71. **Benoni and District Parish Notes**, November 1918, p.3.

72. **Church Chronicle**, 28/11/1918, pp.456-7. The original appeared in the **George Diocesan Magazine**, November 1918, pp.6-8.

73. **St Andrew's Presbyterian Church Record**, November 1918, p.86.

74. **South African Baptist**, November 1918, pp.4-5.

75. **Catholic Magazine for South Africa**, June 1919, p.281.

76. See p.74 above.

77. **The Congregationalist**, March 1919, p.5. The editorial endorsement is on p.1.

78. On Dube, see **Dictionary of South African Biography**, vol. III (Cape Town, 1977), p.242; S. Marks: 'The Ambiguities of Dependence: John L. Dube of Natal' in **Journal of Southern African Studies**, vol. 1, no. 2 (1975), pp.162-180.

decadent and immoral lifestyle. This view he enunciated repeatedly to the African readers of his **Ilange lase Natal**, since it was 'a matter of importance for the Native mind to see this truth, and not be misled by the twaddle so often found for beguiling people'.<sup>79</sup>

Within the Methodist Church articulated opinion embraced all the views set out in the last paragraph: from the Johannesburg minister who declared that neglect of slum conditions had called down a 'withering, destroying' curse upon them,<sup>80</sup> to the more measured resolution of a District Synod that 'this calamity, permitted of God, was largely due to the social conditions amid which vast numbers of the people are compelled to live . . .'.<sup>81</sup> For its part, the official **Methodist Churchman** did not directly mention God in its explanation, merely stating that Nature had been assailed by an 'incidental, or accidental' sickness which, 'but for overcrowding . . . would have proved to be little more than an ordinary visitation of influenza'.<sup>82</sup>

For all their variations, each of the above interpretations was trying to achieve the same goal: to reconcile a traditional belief in an omnipotent God with the discoveries of science and medicine during the preceding century.

Nor did this great debate remain merely academic, for, acting on medical advice, numerous local authorities decided to try to prevent all indoor public gatherings, including church services. They hoped that this would stop the 'flu spreading even more rapidly.

Clergymen's responses varied, reflecting the uncertainty in the minds of many — whatever their opinion as to the cause of the epidemic — when the teachings of faith and of science came into conflict over a matter widely supposed to concern life and death. Predictably, D.R.C. ministers had the fewest doubts: it was plainly unchristian, declared **De Kerkbode**, 'om, waar men onder de beproevende en kastijdende hand Gods verkeert, de gezamenlijke toenadering van de gemeente des Heeren te verhinderen'.<sup>83</sup> Most Anglican clerics also expressed themselves in favour of continuing regular services, either because it was, 'a time when people are looking to their religion for help and comfort'<sup>84</sup> or because not to do so 'would be surrendering every principle that is most precious and discarding GOD as useless in such times'.<sup>85</sup> Some clergymen — and in this Anglicans were not alone — tried to resolve their dilemma by shortening services or holding them out-of-doors;<sup>86</sup> others carried on with their services regardless, pointing to the non-

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79. **Ilange lase Natal**, 22/11/1918. For further expressions of this opinion, see editions of 18/10/1918, 29/11/1918, 6/12/1918.

80. **Rand Daily Mail**, 29/10/1918.

81. **Daily Dispatch**, 3/2/1919, p.7.

82. **Methodist Churchman**, 21/10/1918, pp.1, 5.

83. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1034.

84. **Cape Times**, 25/10/1918, p.5 (Letter from Archbishop Carter).

85. **Benoni and District Parish Notes**, November 1918, p.5. For an equally vigorous opinion see **The Newsletter**, November 1918, p.303.

86. **Cape Times**, 26/10/1918, p.4; **Springs Parish Messenger**, November 1918, Articles titled 'The Epidemic and Church Services' and 'Sickness and Faith'; A.F. Louw: **My Eerste Neëntig Jaar** (Cape Town, 1958?), p.199; South African Library, Manuscripts Department: MSC 18 (Pocock Family Papers), Box 21, W.F.H. Pocock Letterbook, 1918-21, p.673; Interviews with Mrs. A. Ketkar, Mrs. Rockman and Mr. S. Stone; Letter to author from Mrs. B.E. Rennie, 5/11/1981.

closure of gathering-places such as bars, shops and market-places.<sup>87</sup> In holding their services as usual, Methodist ministers in Cape Town laid special emphasis on the need to provide their congregants with a chance for

'detachment from the present distress, and that comfort and inspiration for further duty . . . Many people at this juncture feel the need of breathing another atmosphere, if only for a brief space',

they declared.<sup>88</sup>

Methodists elsewhere<sup>89</sup> — along with a number of ministers of smaller denominations in Cape Town<sup>90</sup> — did heed the authorities' call to halt services. Few of these justified their decision, beyond citing 'the interests of public health'<sup>91</sup> or prudence and necessity.<sup>92</sup> Only Rev. Frederick Conquer, the Congregationalist chaplain to the Mayor of Cape Town, went further, when, with a flourish of theological modernism, he argued in a letter to the **Cape Times**:

'On general grounds, if the churches are to open for public assembly, I fail to see why we should discriminate against the theatres. Whatever ecclesiastics may think about our newly-made acquaintance, the bacillus catarrhalis, there is no essential difference between a congregation assembled for public worship and a crowd gathered to witness the screening of a film.'<sup>93</sup>

There can be little doubt that **De Kerkbode** was not alone in the dismay it expressed at Conquer's letter. Compared with his views, it said, its belief in the primacy of the spiritual over the physical 'is echter ouderwetsch en onwetenschappelijk'; yet, it concluded after weighing up the two, 'geslotene kerken vullen ons met grooter vrees dan de bacillus catarrhalis, . . .'<sup>94</sup>

Apart from the Ladybrand case in 1919,<sup>95</sup> there is no evidence that local authorities tried to force White ministers to suspend their indoor services where they were determined to continue. However, there is reason to believe that they were not as tolerant

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87. **Cape Times**, 26/10/1918, p.8 (Letter from Rev. A.H. Hodges); **De Kerkbode**, 14/11/1918, p.1082; **The Friend**, 20/5/1919, p.6; University of the Witwatersrand Library, Historical and Literary Papers Division: AB 487/9 (Letterbook of Bishop Sidwell), p.382.

88. **Cape Times**, 26/10/1918, p.8 (Letter from Rev. A.H. Hodges).

89. **The Friend**, 20/5/1919, p.6.

90. **Cape Times**, 19/10/1918, pp.3, 6; 25/10/1918, p.4; 26/10/1918, p.4.

91. **Cape Times**, 26/10/1918, p.8 (Letter from Rev. F. Conquer).

92. **The Friend**, 20/5/1919, p.6.

93. **Cape Times**, 26/10/1918, p.8 (Letter from Rev. F. Conquer). So radical a line upset the Mayor, even though he had issued the original request for services to be suspended. In an angry letter to Conquer he reproved him for signing himself 'Mayor's Chaplain', thereby implying that his view had the Council's approval and placing the Mayor 'in possible conflict with the other clergy' (Cape Archives: 3/CT, vol. 3/5/1/1/16, p.85).

94. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, p.1035.

95. See Phillips: 'Black October', ch. 11, pp.390-1.

of African ministers who were of a like mind.<sup>96</sup> Probably their general disinclination to enforce suspension stemmed from a lack of conviction that science had explained the epidemic more adequately than religion had. Certainly the confusion within the medical profession did not inspire confidence. Rev. F.C. Kolbe probably expressed more than Catholic thinking when he began his article on the epidemic in the **Catholic Magazine** as follows:

‘“Master, the people must be very wicked, when God punishes them so hard.”

So said an old Malay woman to the present writer during the worst days of the terrible epidemic, . . .

The plain man who realises the impotence of science in [the] face of a catastrophe of this kind, and who has a real faith in the Providence of God and a knowledge of the moral condition of modern society, is inclined to agree with the Malay woman, Mahomedan though she be.<sup>97</sup>

(iii) **Deliberate action by malevolent groups/individuals**

Popular explanations which assign responsibility for the epidemic to ill-willed people are particularly revealing about existing attitudes to others and beliefs and prejudices about them — as has been noted with regard to popular attribution of blame for the 1831-32 cholera epidemic in Britain, ‘the scapegoat is never chosen at random, but for reasons of logic’.<sup>98</sup>

The crudest logic was that of those super-patriots who, after four years of intense anti-German propaganda, were quite prepared to see in the devastating epidemic yet another example of German ‘frightfulness’. ‘Spanish influenza is not a suitable name. German plague is more accurate,’ the local M.O.H. and District Surgeon told the **Uitenhage Times** at the height of the epidemic,<sup>99</sup> while the **Cape Times**, relying on information ‘from a high medical authority . . . that Spanish influenza may be directly traced to the use of poison gas by the Germans’,<sup>100</sup> bitterly concluded that here was ‘apparently another penalty which civilisation has to pay for the prostitution of German science to the service of the Devil’.<sup>101</sup>

That such opinions were not the peculiar preserve of jingoistic doctors and leader-writers is borne out by other reports. **The Friend** stated that it had received numerous

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96. Cape Archives: 1/UTA, vol. 6/1/218, file 28, v. 8, Circular from Resident Magistrate, Umtata to various ministers, 22/10/1918; Resident Magistrate, Umtata to A. Mtengane, 9/12/1918. Report of interview with M. Dlamini with regard to events in Swaziland (in letter to author from Professor H.W. Turner, 17/5/1979).

97. **Catholic Magazine for South Africa**, November 1918, p.495. For another example of doubts about science’s ability to explain everything, see **De Vriend des Volks**, 31/10/1918, Editorial.

98. M. Durey: **The Return of the Plague — British Society and the Cholera 1831-32** (Dublin, 1979), p.156.

99. **Uitenhage Times**, 16/10/1918.

100. **Cape Times**, 7/10/1918, p.5.

101. **Ibid.**, Editorial.

letters concerning 'the Kaiser's alleged share in or authorship of this calamity';<sup>102</sup> the **Transkeian Gazette** reported similar views among Africans in the Kentani District,<sup>103</sup> while a Pretoria doctor passed on to a journalist a contorted version of the same, as related to her by an old Indian woman.<sup>104</sup> Though, in the end, common-sense made it dismiss such explanations, the **Methodist Churchman** exemplified this widespread readiness to believe the very worst of the Germans when it admitted that it felt, '... the Germans would, if they could, introduce disease germs in all the Allied countries if thereby there was any chance of their winning the war'.<sup>105</sup> An eight-year old girl took no chances: she wore a camphor bag around her neck 'to keep off the Germans'.<sup>106</sup>

Given the press revelations concerning the Government's failure to prevent the 'flu entering South Africa and then spreading country-wide,<sup>107</sup> it is not surprising that in some of those quarters where suspicion of the Government's every action was rife, the epidemic was attributed to its deliberate malevolence. In the Transvaal, for instance, an Afrikaner woman told a relief-worker:

'... hulle het 'n telegram gestuur uit Kaapstad aan Botha, om te vra wat gedaan met 'n skeepsloading soldate wat lij aan die kakie-pes. En Botha het terug geantwoord: "laat hul los, dat dit al die nasionaliste uitroei!"<sup>108</sup>

From a strongly Nationalist constituency in the O.F.S. a correspondent of the pro-Government **De Vriend des Volks** complained how locals 'schrift alles aan Botha toe. Botha is oorzaak van de wereldpest ... Het is Botha voor en na het gebed ...'<sup>109</sup> An editorial in this newspaper ten days later lamented the fact that, 'n Verstandelike en zedelijke pestilentie waart rond onder ons, 'n neiging om ten koste van waarheid en redelijkheid de tegenstander zwart te maken'.<sup>110</sup>

To some Africans such enmity among Whites was trifling when compared with the antipathy which they believed Whites bore towards them. To them the epidemic was 'connected with the schools established by the white people'<sup>111</sup> or, worse still, it was an

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102. **The Friend**, 8/11/1918, Editorial. For more opinions of this sort, see **Kimberley Evening Star**, 9/11/1918, p.6; **Cape Argus**, 1/11/1918, p.8; 2/10/1965, Magazine section, p.11; **Farm, Road and Seaside — The South African Caterer**, October 1918, p.9; **Architect, Builder and Engineer**, 1/11/1918, p.19; **Woman's Outlook**, November 1918, p.6; **South African Nursing Record**, November 1918, p.22; South African Library, Manuscripts Department: MSC 18 (Pocock Family Papers), Box 21, W.F.H. Pocock Letterbook 1918-1921, p.670; Letter to author from Mr. H. Stuurman, 12/11/1980; Interview with Sister Diympla.
103. **Transkeian Gazette**, 31/10/1918, 'Kentani Notes'. For further examples of such views among rural Africans see **St Matthew's College Magazine**, Special Supplement Number, 12/11/1918, p.2; South African Library, Manuscripts Department: MSC 15 (J.X. Merriman Correspondence), Letter 576 from M. Aphorpo to J.X. Merriman, 9/11/1918; Interview with Mr. P. Ndaba.
104. **The Friend**, 29/11/1918, p.5.
105. **Methodist Churchman**, 21/10/1918, p.1.
106. Collier Collection: Letter from Mr. E.J. Read, 5/5/1972.
107. See Phillips: 'Black October', ch. 2; pp.27-28 and ch. 6, pp.198-200.
108. **De Volkstem**, 3/12/1918, p.11. For a variation on this interpretation, see **De Noord-Westelyke Nationalist**, 8/11/1918, p.3.
109. **De Vriend des Volks**, 19/12/1918, p.2.
110. **De Vriend des Volks**, 30/12/1918, Editorial.
111. Cape of Good Hope: **Report of the Superintendent-General of Education for 1919**, C.P.4-'20, p.42.

'action of the Government to kill off the people'.<sup>112</sup> Relief-workers in the Victoria East district had found themselves preceded by a local, announcing 'that this disease was a device of the Europeans to finish off the Native races of South Africa'.<sup>113</sup> A Transvaal missionary reported a version with a significant twist: the influenza epidemic, he was told, was a judgement on Whites for their harsh treatment of Africans, 'particularly in not increasing their wages'.<sup>114</sup> It is important to note, however, that beliefs of White animosity to Africans were not limited to South Africa; they were common in colonial Africa, especially during epidemics.<sup>115</sup>

Other Africans sought an explanation for the epidemic within a traditional framework. This generally ascribed misfortunes to an ancestor punishing a descendant for some breach of custom or a 'witch'/'wizard' who was a human with evil intent born of anger, envy or selfishness.<sup>116</sup>

Extant sources point to the latter as the most commonly accepted explanation among non-Christians in the Transkei during the epidemic,<sup>117</sup> but this may be the result of other interpretations having left even less evidence for the historian sixty years later. Nevertheless, the evidence of attribution to a 'witch'/'wizard' is most illuminating and was not without significant consequences at various levels.

In his Annual Report for 1918, the Commissioner of Police, Transkei Division, reported that:

... the witch-doctor has been more active than in previous years. The recent Influenza Epidemic ravaged the Natives and in their ignorance they ascribed the visitations to various causes and reasons, blaming friends and relatives for having caused the illness and death of those near and dear to them.

There has been an increase of Smelling-Out cases and a resultant increase in the number of crimes of violence reported, also mainly due to the witch-doctor.'

He illustrated this increase with a typical case: the flu epidemic had killed several residents of a kraal near Lusikisiki where there had been one or two deaths earlier in the year. At that time witch-finders ('isanusi') had named a kraal head, Msila, as being

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112. IEC, vol. 1, file 4: Evidence of Rev. J. Henderson, p.3. See too F. Schimlek: *Mariannhill* (Mariannhill, 1950), p.211.

113. *Christian Express*, 2/12/1918, p.185. For similar opinions see *St. Matthew's College Magazine*, Special Supplement Number, 12/11/1918, p.2; Interview with Rev. E.E. Mahabane.

114. *Presbyterian Churchman*, January 1919, p.7.

115. P. Curtin et al.: *African History* (Boston and Toronto, 1978), p.554. For an example of the Spanish flu being so attributed in Nyasaland, see *De Koningsbode*, August 1919, p.156; *Cape Times*, 15/11/1919, p.11.

116. P. Bohannan: *African Outline* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p.210; G. Parrinder: *Africa's Three Religions* (2nd edition, London, 1976), p.65; W.D. Hammond-Tooke (ed.): *The Bantu-Speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* (2nd edition, London, 1974), pp.335-6, 359; P. Mayer: 'Witches' in M. Marwick (ed.): *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp.53, 63; G.W. Hartwig: 'Social Consequences of Epidemic Diseases: The Nineteenth Century in Eastern Africa' in G.W. Hartwig and K.D. Patterson (eds.): *Disease in African History* (Durham, N.C., 1978), pp.36-37.

117. This appears to have been so elsewhere in Africa too — see, for example, J. Iliffe: *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), p.270.

responsible, but others had disagreed and no action had been taken. Now, 'flu deaths in the same kraal had decided the survivors to deal with Msila once and for all.

They attacked his kraal early in the evening, killed him, cut his wife and infant child so badly that they died the following morning, two boys aged 15 and 17, respectively, were seriously wounded, . . .<sup>118</sup>

Two similar cases were heard by the magistrate of Tabankulu;<sup>119</sup> in both cases, witch-finders had named a friend or relative of the 'flu victim as responsible for death. 'Witchcraft is very rampant in Pondoland', the magistrate commented, '. . . and there is hardly a single heathen married woman who does not sooner or later undergo the rites and ceremonies of "twaaing" i.e. graduation in the occult art of a witch-doctor or witch finder (isanusi). The recent Spanish Influenza epidemic has been the cause of these people being very much in request and of their being the cause of much persecution and trouble'.<sup>120</sup>

So great was the increase in ritual naming of 'witches'/'wizards' after the epidemic that the Official Conference of Transkeian Magistrates in 1919 requested that the witchcraft clauses in the relevant Act be tightened up.<sup>121</sup> This was supported by the Solicitor-General of the Eastern Cape who mentioned that:

'Many cases of homicide and serious assault resulting from "smelling out" have come to my notice recently especially after the outbreak of influenza in the native territories . . .'<sup>122</sup>

This combined pressure resulted in an amendment to the Transkeian Penal Code in November 1919 which laid down stiffer penalties for those convicted of 'witch-finding'.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the increase in ritual naming was also one factor in bringing to the Native Affairs Department's attention the urgency of providing proper medical facilities in African areas — as a senior Departmental official argued, 'it is impossible to stamp out witchcraft and similar practices until the natives are given an opportunity of receiving European medical aid'.<sup>124</sup>

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118. Cape Archives: CMT 3/872, file 638.31, Annual Report of Transkei Division of S.A. Police for 1918, p.4 (also in **Report of the Commissioner, South African Police for 1918**, U.G. 2-'20, pp.48-9.)

119. Cape Archives: CMT 3/942, file 820, Records of cases, *The King vs Tiki* and *The King vs Tshunqwana*. Both of these cases went on appeal to the Supreme Court. These judgments are in Central Archives: JUS 276, file 2/474/19.

120. Cape Archives: CMT 3/942, file 820, Record of case, *The King vs Tiki*, p.3. See too **Territorial News**, 19/12/1918; **Daily Dispatch**, 5/11/1918, p.7 (Letter from 'A Transkei Resident') and 20/11/1918, p.10.

121. Cape Archives: CMT 3/942, file 820, Chief Magistrate Transkei to Secretary for Native Affairs, 14/6/1919.

122. Cape Archives: CMT 3/942, file 820, Solicitor-General, Grahamstown to Secretary for Native Affairs, 18/7/1919, enclosed in Secretary for Native Affairs to Chief Magistrate Transkei, 28/7/1919.

123. **Union of South Africa Government Gazette**, vol. XXXVIII, no. 1013, 5/12/1919, p.441, Proclamation no. 164.

124. Cape Archives: CMT 3/653, file 97, Identical Minute from G.A. Godley, 29/4/1919.

(iv) **Unintended result of World War I**

The frequent references to World War I in contemporary explanations of the epidemic are not surprising, for the bloody warfare in Europe made a deep impression on South Africa, even though only a small proportion of its population was actively involved. The fiercely patriotic Unionist and South African Party press carried detailed reports of the fighting, while films and newsreels drove home the same message: a war of unprecedented magnitude and ferocity was being waged, with horrific new weapons being employed almost at random.

It was the indiscriminate use of poison gas which aroused the suspicions of the District Surgeon of East London, for, like the Spanish 'flu, it too affected the throat and lungs. He told the Influenza Epidemic Commission that he would like to know more about the gases used in Flanders and since spread worldwide 'before excluding them, as a possible cause of the extreme virulence of the late Influenza pandemic'.<sup>125</sup> Some such explanation took root at a popular level too. In 1978 an old labourer explained,

'Daardie siekte moes gekom het met die besoedeling van die lug . . . [Die] 1914 oorlog het die lug . . . baie besoedel . . . al die boms en goeters . . . travel [sic] met die wind . . .'<sup>126</sup>

In Cape Town some people concluded that the exhaust smoke from a local aeroplane had produced the same effect as it flew over the Peninsula.<sup>127</sup>

Alternatively, among many other laymen the belief was (and remains) widespread that the 'flu epidemic arose from the scores of unburied corpses left decomposing on the battlefield. 'People said that it was because of the war', an old 'flu survivor told me. 'Soldiers were killed and their bodies left lying around rotting. Germs were picked up from this, which caused the Spanish 'flu.'<sup>128</sup> Others related similar stories.<sup>129</sup> Even in the remoter parts of Manyikaland, Southern Rhodesia, a version of this explanation was current in 1918. 'So many were killed in the great war of the white people', local **ngangas** (ritual experts) explained, 'that the blood of the dead had caused this great sickness'.<sup>130</sup>

What all these explanations reflect is the contemporary sense of horror at what was taking place on the Western Front.<sup>131</sup> To many it clearly was a place where terrible things were happening and could be expected to happen. When men so flagrantly broke the laws of humanity and nature every day, a deadly disease came as no surprise.

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125. IEC, vol. 1, file 4: Evidence of Dr. B. Anderson, p.1. See too **De Burger**, 10/1/1919, p.4; **Cape Argus**, 14/10/1918, p.6 (Letter from 'Interested'); 23/10/1918, p.6 (Letter from C.D.F.).

126. Interview with Mr. J. Granger.

127. **Architect, Builder and Engineer**, November 1918, p.43; Interview with Mrs. P. Weisbecker.

128. Interview with Mr. D. Drever.

129. Letter to author from Mrs. E. Malherbe, 10/12/1982. Interviews with Mrs. Cross; Mr. H.Z. de Villiers; Mr. Eden; Mrs. G. Gafiel-Cader; Mrs. M. Jones; Mrs. A. Ketkar; Mrs. Scully; Mr. S. Stone. Collier Collection: Letter from Mrs. H. Dey (née Wilmot), 25/5/1972.

130. W. Sachs: **Black Anger** (Westport, 1972), p.32.

131. On such feelings in Britain see J. Terraine: **The Smoke and the Fire** (London, 1980), pp.36-7, 102; A. Marwick: **The Deluge — British Society and the First World War** (Harmondsworth, 1967), pp.227-9.

'De Hemel alleen weet welke andere rampen ons nog te wachten staan van terugkerende mensen die gedurende vier jaar in holen in de grond geleefd hebben ...',

pondered **Ons Vaderland** apprehensively.<sup>132</sup>

### Underlying Ideas

At a more general level of thought, several features stand out clearly from some of the explanations outlined above.

Firstly, in their conception of God the three Afrikaans churches differed markedly from nearly all other Christian denominations. Their God was in the archetypal Calvinist mould: all-seeing, wrathful, punishing sin by direct intervention — everything that happened was an expression of His will. In contrast to this, most other denominations envisaged God as somewhat removed from humanity's daily affairs, a view intensified by the gruesome experiences of World War I.<sup>133</sup> In their eyes, He was the ultimate mover, the designer whose laws were immanent in the workings of Nature; these the human mind was meant to ascertain and to follow. Underlying this conception was an attempt to come to terms with the discoveries of science about the make-up and mechanism of the world. This was aimed at achieving what an influential group of modernist Anglicans hoped would be 'a reconciliation which shall at once set the scientific and critical movement, . . . free from the peril of irreligion, and the religious movement free from the imputation of hostility to new knowledge'.<sup>134</sup> Such attempts at accommodation the Afrikaans churches quite specifically rejected in their fundamentalist interpretations of the flu epidemic. Not surprisingly, they alone proclaimed a special Day of Humiliation to pray for the removal of the epidemic.<sup>135</sup> Even the Government jibbed at such a step.<sup>136</sup> One columnist noted perceptively,

'The day is not long past when a plague occurred, to call out the priests and parade the host; today the engineer looks sharply to the drains.'<sup>137</sup>

A second underlying idea which explanations of the epidemic highlight was the pervasive sense of anxiety among many Afrikaners. For them the epidemic constituted yet another threat to their continued existence as a 'volk', to be added to recent traumatic episodes

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132. **Ons Vaderland**, 29/10/1918, Editorial.

133. O. Chadwick: **The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century** (Cambridge, 1977), p.262; A. Vidler: **The Church in an Age of Revolution** (Harmondsworth, 1965), p.212.

134. Quoted in B.M.G. Reardon: **Religious Thought in the Victorian Age** (London and New York, 1980), p.434.

135. **De Kerkbode**, 31/10/1918, pp.1025-1026; 7/11/1918, p.1051; I. Hexham: **The Irony of Apartheid — The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism** (New York and Toronto, 1981), p.66. The Natal D.R.C.'s special service was one of thanks for the end of both World War I and of the epidemic (**Notulen der 48ste Alg. Kerkvergadering van de N.G.K. van Natal, 1919**, p.9).

136. Central Archives: PM 1/1/238, file PM 110/35/1917, Administrator of O.F.S. to Minister of Interior, 5/12/1918; Secretary to the Acting Prime Minister to Administrator of O.F.S., 13/12/1918 (also in O.F.S. Archives: PAS 147, file 348). Cape Archives: A583 (F.S. Malan Collection), vol. 17, Untitled sub-file inside file marked 'Geheime Stukke — Kabinet & Ministerieel', Telegram from General Botha to Minister Malan, 14/11/1918; Telegram from F.S. Malan to General Botha, 14/11/1918; **De Burger**, 31/10/1918, Editorial.

137. **Transkeian Gazette**, 26/12/1918.

such as the Anglo-Boer War with its 26 000 Afrikaner victims, Milnerism, the party political split and the internecine Rebellion.

'Wil jij met spotgebaar vir ons nog meer bij al ons swaar af in die dieptes druk?' asked the fiery nationalist poet, D.F. Malherbe, in his emotion-charged poem, 'Die Plaag'.<sup>138</sup> In *De Burger*, a less eminent poet noted how — as in 1899 and 1914 — it was once again October that had brought calamity to the Afrikaner 'volk'.<sup>139</sup> Perhaps there was a higher purpose behind this string of disasters hoped a *De Vriend des Volks* correspondent: 'Door lijden en verdrukking wordt 'n volk geboren.'<sup>140</sup>

Others saw no such prospect in the gloomy situation for 'ons arme ou volkie, wat aan sink is', as one reader put it in *De Burger*. Life had become

'so 'n treurigheid: oorlog, droogte, hongersnood en pestilensie; aan alle kante dreig die gevaar ons, terwijl die spaanse griep duisende van slagoffers daaglik om ons heen weg maai'.<sup>141</sup>

This decimation filled another with the deepest pessimism for the future and he asked despairingly,

'Schijnt het niet of er waarheid in zit, dat de Afrikaner moet uitgeroeid worden? . . . De oorlog eiste 26 000 vrouwen en kinders, maar hoeveel zal de Imperiale Pest nemen . . .'<sup>142</sup>

The loss of so many promising young lives to what one popular journal called 'die verraderlike epidemie'<sup>143</sup> caused particular anguish. A poetaster summed up these sentiments feelingly:

'Spaanse Griep, van oorseese strand,  
Wat maak jij in ons vaderland?  
Het ons dan nie genoeg gelij.  
Vir reg het ons so swaar baklei.  
Baje vrouwe, kinders en mans  
Is deur honger, moord, koe'el en lans,  
In die doodsvallei gejaagd,  
Hul lot word deur die volk beklagd.  
Spaanse Griep, jij is nog 'n dolk  
In die deurboorde hart van 'n volk,

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138. *Die Huisgenoot*, February 1919, p.644. Malherbe had lost a young daughter in the epidemic (Union of South Africa: *Report of Under Secretary for Education for 1918, Part II*, U.G. 8-20, p.12).

139. *De Burger*, 19/11/1918, p.3.

140. *De Vriend des Volks*, 25/11/1918, Excelsior report. For similar interpretations in the wake of the Anglo-Boer War, see I. Hexham: *The Irony of Apartheid*, pp.69-70; T.D. Moodie: *The Rise of Afrikanerdom* (Berkeley, 1975), pp.36-37.

141. *De Burger*, 25/11/1918, p.4 (Letter from K.B.).

142. *Ons Vaderland*, 19/11/1918, p.3 (Letter from O.T. van Niekerk). See too *Ons Vaderland*, 1/11/1918, p.6 (Letter from D.S. vanden Berg) and 8/11/1918, p.6 (Letter from P.J.H. Steyn); *De Burger*, 6/12/1918, p.2.

143. *Die Brandwag*, November 1918, p.162.

Wie s'n wonde glad nie wil heel,  
 Want hul verlies is al te veel; . . .  
 Spaanse Griep, gaat tog weg van hier,  
 Want as jij nou nog langer duur,  
 Dan blij daar oor, slegs hier en daar,  
 Van ons uitgemoorde volk 'n paar.<sup>144</sup>

With such apprehensions about the survival of the Afrikaner 'volk' in the air, it is little wonder that once the 'flu epidemic and the divisive issue of World War I had passed, Afrikaners' determination to secure their own future gathered pace.<sup>145</sup> Nor is it surprising, given such a background, that Johanna Brandt's millenarian prophecies should have attracted so much notice among Afrikaners.<sup>146</sup> It is widely held that

'Millenarian movements almost always occur in times of upheaval, in the wake of culture contact, economic dislocation, revolution, war, and natural catastrophe . . . Millenarian movements do not flourish during periods that are otherwise stable; a catalyst is required.'<sup>147</sup>

By the same token, post-epidemic millenarian movements among Africans doubtless point to the presence of acute social distress and anxiety among them, arising from a string of calamities since Union, such as the outbreak of East Coast Fever in 1912, the 1913 Land Act, the rapid wartime rise in prices and taxes, the severe droughts of 1914-1916, the floods of 1916-1917 and the sinking of the 'Mendi' in 1917.<sup>148</sup> This turmoil the 'flu disaster compounded and/or crystallised. A missionary in a district bordering the Transkei was told by one of his African congregants early in 1919:

'It is as if the Plagues of Egypt are upon us. First the awful War, then this pestilence and now boils, and the near dread of a famine, the season is so against all crops and fruits.'<sup>149</sup>

144. *Ons Vaderland*, 1/11/1918, p.8.

145. See Phillips: 'Black October', ch. 11, pp.408-411.

146. See p.79 above. The Afrikaans version of *Die Millenium* went through at least three editions in 1918 (the South African Library has a copy marked '3de druk, 1918', dated 5/11/1918).

147. M. Barkun: *Disaster and the Millenium*, p.45. For similar opinions, see K. Burridge: *New Heaven New Earth* (Oxford, 1980), pp.3, 128-9; D.B. Barrett: *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi, 1968), pp.92-94; J.F.C. Harrison: *The Second Coming* (London and Henley, 1979), pp.218-220; I. Hexham: 'Afrikaner Nationalism 1902-1914' in P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds.): *The South African War — The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Harlow, 1980), pp.390-391.

148. T.R.H. Davenport: *South Africa — A Modern History* (Johannesburg, 1977), pp.176-179; M. Wilson and L.M. Thompson (eds.): *Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1971), p.131; P.L. Bonner: 'The 1920 Black Mineworkers' Strike: a Preliminary Account' in B. Bozzoli (ed.): *Labour, Townships and Protest* (Johannesburg, 1979), pp.279-282; P.L. Bonner: 'The Transvaal Native Congress 1917-1920' in S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds.): *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa* (London and New York, 1982), p.270; G. Shepperson: 'Ethiopianism: Past and Present' in C.G. Baëta (ed.): *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (Oxford, 1968), pp.253-254; D.D.T. Jabavu: 'Native Unrest' in D.D.T. Jabavu: *The Segregation Fallacy and Other Papers* (Lovedale, 1928) pp.76, 81; R. Bloch: 'The High Cost of Living: The Port Elizabeth "Disturbances" of October 1920' in *Africa Perspective*, no. 19 (1981), p.40.

149. *Christian Express*, 1/4/1919, p.60.

The similarity to statements by Afrikaners is striking, suggesting a correspondence in their structural position in South African society which went beyond the impact of the epidemic on them.

In sum, not only did the Spanish flu epidemic itself exacerbate existing travail in South African society; its very intensity pushed this travail to the surface and caused it to be expressed. Its role in what Roux describes as the 'considerable ferment of ideas and notions, political and otherwise . . . stirring . . . in the decade following upon the end of the First World War'<sup>150</sup> should not be disregarded. The purely psychological shadow which it cast in South Africa was long. There are more than a few hints of what Langer, referring to the aftermath of the Black Death, identified as 'a mass emotional disturbance, based on a feeling of helpless exposure, disorientation, and common guilt'.<sup>151</sup>

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150. E. Roux: *Time Longer than Rope* (Madison and London, 1966), p.135. For a similar observation, see P. Walshe: *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (London, 1971), p.71. It has been suggested that the flu epidemic had such an effect in India (V. Smith: *Oxford History of India* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1958), p.782).
151. W.L. Langer: 'The Next Assignment' in *American Historical Review*, vol. 63, no. 2 (January 1958), p.299.