

THE DAVID NICHOLS MEMORIAL LECTURE: 2006

Haiti: a failed state. But whose fault is that?

It's a great honour to be standing here to deliver this annual lecture. For two reasons. Firstly to recall the memory of a very remarkable man. If I had a serious criticism of the Church of England it would be this: That it couldn't find an appropriate appointment where David's extraordinary intellectual and pastoral skills could be fittingly deployed. He was a scholar and a Priest. He was a husband and a friend. He was an eccentric who never lost his passion for social justice. And secondly, that such an occasion offers me the possibility of commending the cause of my beloved Haiti to an audience which (I dare to suppose) knows little enough about it. Thank you for inviting me.

I first met David in 1972 in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. Of all things, it was at a reception offered by the British Ambassador in honour of the Queen's birthday! I shall not forget David's arrival, wearing a long shift and sandals, a troubadour who seemed to have forgotten his guitar. His conversation was lively and his insights very probing.

A few years later, his brilliant book *From Dessalines to Duvalier* was published. It gave an amazing overview of the complex and tortuous history of this Caribbean republic. The book's subtitle expressed David's angle of approach very clearly. *Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti*, it read. He suggested that the whole history of Haiti is best understood as a constant struggle between groups that can be differentiated by colour and race. On the one hand there were the mulatto offspring of the French colonial plantocracy whose African slaves were often used to satisfy their sexual needs. And on the other, the mass of black Africans who worked in the fields and who, in the aftermath of Haiti's independence in 1804, moved away from plantation labour to subsistence farming. Some of David's critics thought that this polarisation of Haitian society was too clear-cut by far. And there's some truth in those observations. There's a Haitian proverb that says: "A poor mulatto's a black man and a rich black man is a mulatto." The wisdom of this aphorism suggests that differentiation ought to be made along the lines of class and wealth rather than colour.

For all that, David's book asked some very serious questions of those who are interested in Haitian history. I remember being struck by his account of two historiographies which have interpreted the early decades of Haiti's independence in dramatically different ways. It was such an important contribution to anyone's understanding of Haiti to make this distinction.

Thomas Madiou published his *Histoire d'Haiti* in 1847-1848. As David puts it: "He saw Haiti, founded as a free homeland for African people, as a repayment to

the people of Europe for the oppression which they had inflicted in the past, and for the destruction of the indigenous Indians". Thus, Madiou wanted to exalt the cause of Haiti's African population. David points to Madiou's identification of "two castes in post-colonial Haiti" and showed how this line of analysis proved objectionable to the mulatto elite of his day. Madiou was criticised for apparently wanting to espouse the cause of his country's black population in order to ingratiate himself with the President of his day, President Soulouque, a champion of what David called (I suspect anachronistically) "noirisme".

Over against this line of interpretation stood the writings of those who were wedded to a mulatto legend. The historical writings of Alexis Beaubrun Ardouin and Joseph Saint-Rémy stand in this tradition. These mulatto writers wanted to create a comprehensive outlook on the world and they sought to connect this vision to certain suggested patterns of action in their own day. Their thinking is, therefore, driven by ideology. It's intended "to explain and justify the predominant position enjoyed by the mulatto elite, and thereby to consolidate its position."

The close attention given by David to these different lines of analysis offered a very important key to the understanding of subsequent events in Haiti. Again and again, the mulatto elite has held the country's political future to ransom. The downfall of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide can be understood much better with such a picture in mind. Aristide came from "the black masses" and his relationship with the disenfranchised and marginalised peoples of Haiti was symbiotic. He was "on their wavelength"; he was their champion. And this represented a fundamental threat to the wealthy classes of Haiti ensconced in their Pétionville fastnesses. They acted through their representatives in the Haitian army and ingloriously ousted Aristide in September 1991, just seven months after taking office in the aftermath of a hugely successful election in which he'd gained 67% of the votes.

It's undoubtedly true that the "mulatto elite" has been significantly enforced in recent decades by the arrival of a number of people from the black middle classes created by François Duvalier. But, even after factoring these developments into the situation, David's analysis holds true.

The other section of David's book which commands our attention today is where he examines the American occupation of 1915-1934. The USS *Washington* steamed into Port-au-Prince in July 1915 on the pretext of stabilising Haiti after the brutal assassination of one of its presidents. Haitian commentators have often enough argued that if such were a legitimate reason for invading another country, then America itself was fair game. After all, hadn't three American presidents been assassinated in the 50 years preceding 1915?

There's time tonight to look at only one or two aspects of this twenty year military occupation. Firstly, the systematic reordering of Haitian allegiances in order to

bring the country firmly into the American sphere of influence. Haiti had been faithfully repaying an indemnity imposed on it in 1825 as compensation for the loss of French holdings at the time of independence. There was still a small debt on the Paris stock exchange. The Americans moved this debt to Wall Street. Haiti's long association with France had survived emotionally and aesthetically long after it had been broken politically by the long years of war 1791-1803. The occupying force broke this umbilical cord. A new constitution was prepared for Haiti by the Assistant Secretary of State for the American Navy, none other than Franklin D. Roosevelt, who incorporated as the very first Article a provision which had been steadfastly opposed by Haitians for over 100 years. This new, American-written constitution made it possible for foreigners to own land in Haiti. Soon American corporations had bought up vast tracts of land and fruit, sisal and sugar became significant industrial enterprises. These were financed by large loans raised in the USA and charged to Haiti's account.

Meanwhile the marine occupiers, mainly drawn from the "red-neck" South, treated all Haitians as "niggers". That is, they were totally impervious to the fine gradations within Haitian society, gradations based largely on colour. So mulattos and blacks were all cast in the same light and this led to deep and furious resentment. It also led to an amazing intellectual outburst. Ethnologists and anthropologists, poets and novelists, began to take a greater interest in the peasant population and the African origins of Haitian society. Novels like Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneur de la Rosée* and *Life in a Haitian Valley* by Melville J. Herskovits created great interest in many places. Among those leading the way in such studies was a young medical doctor François Duvalier. He had worked for the occupying Americans in a campaign to eradicate the disease known as Yaws. He'd travelled into the furthest recesses of Haiti's interior – a rare thing for a Haitian intellectual to do. He'd got to know the culture and beliefs of the peasantry. He and two colleagues, Lorimer Denis and Louis Diaquoi, founded a movement known as *Les Griots* and this was to have great influence across the country. It also began the career path of a future President-for-Life. Once again, we owe a great debt to David for the clear way in which he showed how the "colour component" (in fact, "colour blindness" would probably be a better descriptive phrase) generated unintended consequences that were to be worked through in the decades following the eventual withdrawal of the Americans.

My only criticism of David's approach lay in the fact that he gathered his information largely from Haiti's intellectual class. Inevitably, that gave undue and disproportionate prominence to the very mulatto elite whose influence he had defined so well. More needed to be done on the side of the illiterate and marginalised peasant class. Both the tyranny of François Duvalier and the populism of Jean-Bertrand Aristede can only truly be understood by a close knowledge of the mind of Haiti's rural poor.

Liberation and Theology

I arrived in Haiti to begin my ten years association with that extraordinary place in the summer of 1970. I met François Duvalier twice: He died shortly afterwards (though I don't think there was any causal relationship between those two facts). His son was to rule Haiti in a similar repressive vein for a further fifteen years till his downfall in February 1986. This was a period when the iron fist of tyranny was permeated by increasing evidence of decadence as a playboy President indulged his various appetites. This was also a time of great intellectual ferment. I arrived in the middle of it.

The Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops had met at Medellin in Columbia in 1968. It had considered the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, its "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). The Conference took seriously the injunction to work out various understandings of the Christian message in the light of different prevailing cultural contexts. It began to work out the need to develop a theology "from below". Traditionally in Latin America, theology had been done "from above" – by theologians and hierarchical bodies which went on to impose their deliberations on the faithful. Now, ordinary grass-roots believers were encouraged to think about their own faith. There was a need for the Church, traditionally believed to be on the side of the rich and the powerful, to develop "a preferential option for the poor". A lot of this thinking was to be formulated and presented in a book by a Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez called *A Theology of Liberation* which appeared in 1970.

When I arrive in Haiti all this was happening. I had been given responsibility for a rural Circuit of 48 churches that stretched across much of Haiti's southern peninsular (and included seven churches on the island of La Gonâve. I reached the most distant of these by mule or on foot and, to my great astonishment, I found Roman Catholic priests and catechists working with ordinary believers at programmes of "conscientisation" (the raising of self-awareness) amidst great excitement. The theological degree I'd pursued at Cambridge had not fitted me for this. But I entered into the spirit of things with great gusto.

It was by fate that I'd ended up in rural Haiti. As a new (as yet un-ordained) Methodist minister, it was intended that I should have protected position as assistant to an established practitioner in a city parish. Instead, I was let loose on the Haitian countryside! I spoke reasonably fluent French but not a word of Haitian Crèole. I depended totally and utterly on local peasant people for my survival skills and for the development of any knowledge I could hope to acquire of Haitian culture, history and language. I developed huge respect for the disenfranchised and marginalised rural poor. Their hospitality was warm and

generous. They had wit and wisdom galore. They were such creative people – their art and poetry, their music and song were truly marvellous.

Because I had entered such a situation unwittingly, and because I depended so completely on unformed and uneducated people, I took the tenets of liberation theology unthinkingly into my system. There was no alternative for me but to work with people “from below”. I had to work out my own theology in a way that respected the realities that confronted me. I became very fluent in Haitian Crèole (it’s a language I still think in). And I linked arms with these young and brilliant Roman Catholic priests who’d been sent by their Bishops into isolated rural communities in the belief that would calm them down, absorb their surplus energy, give them at time for mature reflection before coming back to a “proper parish” in the city. The very opposite proved to be the case. These priests would eventually form an intelligence network, a force for change, across the Republic. And out of their number would emerge a firebrand, a stunningly brilliant intellect, a man whose identification with Haiti’s peasantry would be symbiotic. This was Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Whilst many of the allegations made against him later – that he’d become authoritarian, that he’d justified the use of cruelty and torture, the he’d surrounded himself with thugs – might well be upheld, it remains true that what he represented at time of the collapse of the Duvalier dynasty was vital to any future that might offer hope to Haiti’s poor. He spoke for people who’d never had a voice. He introduced energies to Haiti’s political equation that had never previously been available. He showed a new way forward. In other words, he was the perfect embodiment of the finest principles of liberation theology. And, faced with such a phenomenon, the mulatto elite took fright. They put up their defences. They withdrew into their bunkers. They found ways of stopping him and diverting his path. They saw to it there was no supportive mechanism through which the energies he was bringing could be channelled for good. His was an experiment doomed to fail. Haiti’s age-old problem raised its ugly head once again.

François Duvalier, in his early years as an ethnologist, had written a short book entitled: *Le Problème des Classes à travers l’Histoire d’Haiti*. He’d put Haiti’s troubles down to class. David Nicholls identified the root of the problem in terms of colour. Whichever of these criteria is true, the problem is very real and, 200 years after gaining its independence, no-one has yet come up with a solution. The late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s may have been the last available moment for the healing of these historical wounds. There may have been a window of opportunity half opened but quickly and firmly shut almost at once.

It is very easy to blame Aristide for what happened after his election. It remains a fact that he found a legislature that refused to co-operate with him, a non-existent judiciary and a total lack of any system of justice. He found himself pitted against the might of the Haitian army with its traditional loyalties to the

dictatorship. And he was sniped at by the remnant of Duvalier's Tontons Macoute. He was stuck in Port-au-Prince whilst his main support was to be found outside its limits. The urban poor in some of Port-au-Prince's worst slums were among his fiercest allies but they were kept subdued by prevailing forces which were always better armed than they. So the brave new world of Aristide collapsed. And he was roundly blamed for it.

The international community needs to look at its own methodologies and responses to Haiti's problem. Aristide was ousted by the military in September 1991. He remained in exile for three years and two months! No-one lifted a finger to restore him. Malign elements in the United States (Senator Jessie Helms and his buddies) were allowed to assassinate his character with salacious stories of his mental condition. The Organisation of American States proved totally inept. Even envoys from the United Nations retreated in fear from the threat of violence in Port-au-Prince. Even sanctions applied by the United Nations failed. It was always a curious fact that, whilst every little boat taking Haitian émigrés towards the promise land of Florida was discovered by the American Coastguard vessels, huge tankers carrying oil to the one and only off-loading point on Haiti's southern coast seemed able to slip by the same cordon with impunity.

When Aristide ultimately returned, he was accompanied by a massive American force of 20000 soldiers! He was returned in a US helicopter. The message could not have been clearer. Aristide was now effectively a finished man. He was a puppet of the United States of America, no longer a Roman Catholic priest (married with a child) and the magic bond with the Haitian people been broken. The moment had passed.

The latest failure in Haiti's history is a massive indictment of those within the Republic who have the historic wealth and strength to work for a solution. Theirs was a total abnegation of will. Alongside that, the inability of the international community in the aftermath of the Cold War to solve even a small problem like Haiti's exposes the threadbare nature of current methodologies for conflict resolution and peace-making. The problem may be Haiti's. But it's also ours.

Leslie Griffiths