

Toeing the line

THE case of Dr. F. E. O'B. Geldenhuys, Moderator of the Northern District Synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk of the Transvaal, throws a revealing light on the fate of the South African in his position who ventures to deviate from strict political and ideological conformity.

It may be recalled that in an address to the Moral Rearmament Conference at Caux, Dr. Geldenhuys spoke of the need for a more understanding and, in essence, a more Christian approach to race relations in South Africa. Out of the innermost depths of his convictions he pleaded for an earnest attempt to seek the goodwill of the non-Whites in arriving at a just answer to the problems that are part and parcel of the common destiny of all races in Africa and the Union in particular.

In the spirit of moral rearmament he frankly acknowledged that, by and large, White South Africans were primarily concerned with their own salvation and were blinded by inertia, selfishness and self-righteousness to what was happening in the world around them. Dr. Geldenhuys made it clear that he was expressing his own views and not those of his Church, but he called upon the Church to become more militant in face of the challenge of the times.

After the publication of a summarized version of these statements in South Africa, Dr. Geldenhuys was immediately exposed to a violent storm of denunciation in a section of the Nationalist Press.

Launched editorially and sustained almost uninterruptedly for more than a fortnight, the attacks had as their main theme the iniquity of an Afrikaans churchman of his stature daring to breathe even the mildest of criticisms against the accepted attitudes of political and racial orthodoxy as understood by the critics. The few voices raised in his defence were swamped by the flood-tide of condemnation, in which such a dreadful word as "liberalism" figured prominently.

Moral rearmament of course received its share of abuse; and Dr. Verwoerd himself could not refrain from using a party platform to issue a grave warning against the dangers of the movement.

It was natural enough that the Church, greatly perturbed by this outcry, should have tried to pour oil on the troubled waters by obtaining a clarification from Dr. Geldenhuys. In the upshot he himself explained and, to some extent, explained away what he had said at Caux. While his apologia did not amount to a recantation, it toned down the effect by a shift of emphasis and some verbal corrections in the reported statement.

We ourselves do not wish to add to the mental distress which a servant of the Church must have felt at the reactions provoked by words spoken in all truth and sincerity; but the moral of the incident cannot be ignored.

Dr. Geldenhuys is only one of the growing number of South Africans subjected to the forces ranged against anyone of his race and faith who does not toe the line and is moved to speak with the voice of conscience.