**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 21: TOBIE MULLER’S NATIONALISM**

**1..Life and death of Tobie Muller:** The short but eventful life of Tobie Muller (1884-1918) gives us a view of a specific phase of Afrikaner nationalism, which can easily be lost from view from a contemporary perspective. He was an outstanding figure in the generation of Afrikaners who reached adulthood just after the war of 1899-1902. He excelled as a student, in sport and as a leader. He was offered the first Rhodes scholarship after matriculating in 1903, but refused it in protest against Rhodes’s imperialism. He gained an MA and a Divinity degree at Stellenbosch by 1909, a doctorate in theology at Utrecht in 1912 and a doctorate in philosophy from Edinburgh in 1913. He became the student chaplain at Stellenbosch and delivered the first-ever sermon in Afrikaans (rather than Dutch) in 1914. He was active in the Afrikaans language movement. In 1916 he was offered the chair of philosophy at Stellenbosch, which he turned down in order to become a minister in the rural town of Philippolis, OFS. He died there in the great flu of 1918. Long after his death, his contemporaries remembered him as the embodying the best of their generation.

**2. Nationalism as self-realization:** Muller’s “Confession of Faith of a Nationalist” was originally a speech to the Afrikaans Language Society (Afrikaanse Taalvereniging) in 1913. Throughout the speech, he compares becoming a nation with the growth of an individual to maturity. It is in the context of a national identity, he argues, that the individual’s capacities—above all, ethical capacities—are most fully realized. Nationalism is seen as a kind of collective self-consciousness, which is the result of conflict with other nations or groups, which makes it possible for a group to participate fully in world history. Although Muller tells the story of Afrikaner suffering in a way that will appeal to traditionalists, the main thrust of his nationalism is forward-looking and modernizing. He is committed to a democratic way of life (p. 8), active world citizenship (pp. 6, 9), intellectual independence rather than rote-learning (p. 10), solidarity with the oppressed nations of the world (p. 11) and a morality that focuses on doing what is right in the present, rather than securing the future (p. 12).

**3. Nationalism, race and civilization:** But all of these forward-looking features of Muller’s nationalism are pervaded by a conflicting set of attitudes to culture and civilization. His picture of the growth of nations depends on a distinction between natural and historical peoples (e.g., p. 2; cf. 5). Although the distinction is not drawn on strictly racial lines, it conforms broadly to them. The critical point in the process of Afrikaner self-discovery was its abandonment, during the war, “by the entire civilized world” (p. 4). In this context, it had to make itself into a civilized people, rather than becoming the “half-civilized tenants of more developed neighbours” (p. 6).

**4. The ethical moment of Afrikaner nationalism?:** Muller’s nationalism can be compared with other moments in South African history in which a new generation finds themselves thrust into modernity and responds by mobilizing a larger group—Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, Lembede’s Africanism at the time of the formation of the ANC Youth League, Black Consciousness after the crushing of internal resistance after Sharpeville, etc. Such intellectuals, lacking the instruments of wealth and power, often conceive of an ethical politics. But for how long such an ethical moment can be maintained on the basis of racial domination?