Ethical Problems, Options and Strategies Facing the Black Church today

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INTRODUCTION

The church and all Christians in South Africa are faced with a serious and worsening situation of conflict. The church in general, and the Black church in particular ought to make an unambiguous response in this time of confusion, stress and crisis. The crisis has not lessened and with the imposing of the State of Emergency has even deepened. There are noticeable divisions in the Church as a whole, the South African public and the Apartheid regime relative to a number of ethical and moral questions that keep on arising from this volatile situation. Questions about the notions of violence-nonviolence, justice-injustice, liberation, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation keep on emerging again and again and again.

Perhaps the harshly real question facing the Black Church in the South African context is that which has been raised to J.G. Davies by students and theologians in the "Third World" namely:

We are Christians living in countries where poverty, exploitation and suffering abound.

There seems no other way to alter the situation except by joining in violent revolution. But is it ever possible to do this and remain a Christian?[2]

To this question, the Black Church must give a carefully reasoned theological response. Moral guidelines must be sought for action and participation by the Black Church in the volatile situation found in South Africa. In order to do this, an analogy will have to be drawn between a just war and a just revolution. Such an approach might enable us to see whether or not there is any theoretical objection to Christian participation in violent revolution.

The purpose of this paper, is to analyse the available options to the Black Church; to reflect on the situation and to determine what response by the Church and all Christians in South Africa would be most appropriate. The crisis situation in the country is a challenge to the Church, especially to the Black Church and Christians are called upon to respond. Unless Christians are challenged they often stick to the stands and percep-

1. Davies, J.G. *Christians, Politics ad Violent Revolution*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1976, pl
2. Swomley Jr., *J.M. Liberation Ethics: A Political Scientist Examines the Role of Violence in Revolutionary Change*, Macmillan, New York, 1972, pl

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tions they have had over the years and do not if these are relevant or moving them closer to the justice and freedom and righteousness to which God calls them. As my starting point or point of departure I will take the view that liberation ethics is a response both to human need and to the biblical emphasis on redemption.

Point of Departure:

J.M. Swomley Jr. has correctly pointed out that liberation ethics begins with the fact of desperate human need to be free from whatever it is that threatens or enslaves. Accordig to J.M. Swomley Jr., liberation ethics holds that the goal of history is the liberation of humankind. Yet liberation is an impossible goal so long as people seek freedom for their own group at the expense of others.[2]

On the other hand, however, the threats to freedom originate in divisiveness, drives for power, and low estimate of the lives of others that are obvious in racism, poverty and other forms of oppression. Swomley Jr. is correct when he contends that liberation ethics also begins with these specific problems, because those most obviously oppressed and those who identify with them are always the key to social change.[3] Indeed, the drama of freedom is always connected with a specific people such as the Israelite slaves in Egypt, Black Americans, Vietnamese peasants, Bolivian miners or black working class – peasants and/or suffering masses in South Africa.

Hence Swomley Jr says that:

Liberation ethics is a response both to human need and to the biblical emphasis on redemption. In fact, liberation is simply a currently more acceptable or modern term for redemption. Both words mean setting (people) free from whatever it is that enslaves them.[4]

It is common knowledge that many people think of liberation "as a secular term with chiefly political overtones and redemption as a distinctively religious or theological word."[5] However, *redemption* was at one time a word with no more religious significance than the term *liberation* implies today. "A slave who was redeemed was set free; he was no longer the property of his owner. He was set free because someone paid a price to redeem him."[6]

Today, however, few people are enslaved by another human being. People are robbed of a rightful freedom by massive systems or structures of society. Some of these systems, such as war and racism, have been in existence for centuries.[7] Everyone is born into one or more of them, as black children and white children in South Africa are born into separate social structures. In fact, some social structures are so much a part of the way of life of a particular society that people accept them without thinking about them. "People then tend to fit into the system and to accept the myths which support or rationalize it."[8]

Thus we live in a world where systems such as the military or war system are seen as necessary even by those who suffer the most from them. "These people, therefore, have tended to think of individuals or groups who *administer* the system as their oppressors rather than the system itself."[9]

3. Ibid, p. 2   **7.** Ibid
4. Ibid   **8.** Ibid
5. Ibid   **9.** Ibid, p. 3
6. Ibid

History shows that people have sought more humane existence at an enormous human cost and yet their efforts at revolutionary social change have not achieved significant freedom for them or their children. Hence liberation ethics is to be viewed as follows:

Liberation ethics is primarily social ethics because it holds the elimination or the conversion of oppressors as individuals does not deal with the structures of oppression embodied in long accepted and interrelated social systems.[10]

Thus the struggle for liberation is not a clandestine operation designed to destroy a few oppressors; it begins with an analysis of society different from one which sees some people as "good guys" who are to be liberated and others as "bad guys" who are to be subjugated or destroyed.[11] Hence the polemic or divisive Christian debate on concepts such as: violence-counter-violence; justice-injustice; liberation-reconciliation, etc, are guided by such an analysis. Because of such polemics the Church in South Africa and in the world is divided into two relative to analysis and perception. We have the Black church and the white church. The experience of the one church is completely foreign to the other. Hence K.M. Rasmeni argues that given this situation, two paths appear to be open to the Church: to break up, let the black church go it alone and allow the white church to remain passive. The other option is to find a way of action together as a Church of Christ.[12]

I do not intend adding anything on the endless debate about violence and non-violence etc. Rather I intend exploring the Black Church's increas-ing awareness of its summons to act in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. I hope that such an exploration will lead to a call for clearer thinking about the kinds of actions which are appropriate to Christian participation in social conflict and, especially about the potentialities and problems of violence and nonviolence. Along the same line of thought, the Notting Hill Consultation on Racism of May 1969 urged the World Council of Churches to adopt the position "that all else failing, the Church and churches support resistance movements, including revolutions, which are aimed at the elimination of political or economic tyranny which makes racism possible."[13]

According to J.G. Davies the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) raised the question of violence and revolution precisely because it led to the recognition of two types of situation and of their interconnection. "The first type is one in which the masses are oppressed in terms of economic and political power. The second is one in which the masses are oppressed in terms of a particular racist policy."[14] Their relationship is affirmed in the following statement:

It is no longer sufficient to deal with the race problem at the level of person-to-person relationships. It is institutional racism as reflected in the economic and political power structures which must be challenged. Combating racism must entail a redistribution of social, economic, political and cultural power from the powerful to the powerless.[15]

Such an effort entails the importance of further investigating the con-

10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. South African Council of Churchs, Ecunews, Vol. 13,
13. No 3, August 1987, p. 3
14. Quoted in Davies, J.G., op cit, p. 2
15. Central Committee of the World Council of Churches meeting in Canterbury, August 1969.

cept of a just revolution. But such an investigation must be done against the backdrop of another approach to liberation, namely, the approach of revolutionaries to their adversaries.

Two Approaches to Liberation

(a) Approach of Revolutionaries:

Revolutionaries such as Robespierre, Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, Castro and counter-revolutionaries such as Napoleon, Franco and Stalin, while prepared to run personal risks, thought to making their adversaries pay the greatest price.[16] According to Swomley, the assumption that we shall make others pay is a product of three obsolete ideas. He says that:

The first is that those who have oppressed us should in some way receive a dose of their own medicine or experience the pain they have inflicted on us. This is revenge. The second is that it is possible for one group to be liberated by a process that enslaves or degrades others ... .
The third obsolete idea is that those in power determine by their resistance to change whether and how much violence there will be.[17]

Swomley argues that the first two ideas depend on a false analysis of the root of the unfreedom. He goes on to say that such false analysis is based on the assumption that oppression is caused by evil individuals or groups; that if they can be defeated or eliminated or forced to change places with the oppressed, liberation will have taken place. Swomley also contends that the third obsolete idea falsely holds that violence must always be met with violence or that the dispossessed fight better when they choose

the methods or weapons of the oppressor. "When put simplistically," says Swomley, "it is said that one must fight fire with fire. But sometimes it is better to smother a fire by depriving it of oxygen or to pour water on it or to isolate it."[18] In other words there are a number of ways by which change takes place in such a way that the oppressor does not determine the methods of liberation.

There are nonviolent methods of resistance such as economic boycott or strikes. These methods depend on numbers of people rather than the "firepower of weapons".

According to Hannah Arendt, there is a distinction between power and violence. She asserts that "power always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements."[19] This means that the larger the number demanding change, the less is their need to rely on violence. "But it also implies that minority reliance on violence can be nullified by superior technology. It is a mistake for the oppressed to let their oppressors choose the weapons they can use more effectively."[20]

(b) Just Revolution:

Another approach to liberation is that of the just revolution patterned after the medieval Christian concept of a just war. According to Swomley, a just, violent revolution is waged only when

1. there is gross injustice on the part of the ruling class;

2. all nonviolent means to eliminate injustice have failed;

16. Ibid
17. Swomley Jr., J.M. op cit, p. 9
18. Ibid, p. 10
19. Ibid
20. Arendt, H. On *Violence*, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., New York, 1969, pp. 41, 42.

3. there is moral certainty that the side of justice will win, and;
4. there is a clear intention to bring into being a just order rather than a mere shift of the reins of power.

He also contends that a just revolution must also be

1. rightly conducted: restrained within the limits of justice and love;
2. fought so that guilt and punishment must be proportionate. Punishment exceeding the measure of guilt is unjust and therefore prohibited, and;
3. careful to avoid unnecessary destruction of lives and property not immediately endangering the revolution..[21]

I agree with Swomley when he says that it would be difficult for anyone who believes in radical social change to indict those who engage in violent revolution if there is great injustice and if repeated efforts to eliminate it by organised nonviolent direct action have failed.[22] Indeed, nonviolent struggle such as strikes, boycotts and sit-ins, can be said to be "successful if they accomplish a limited purpose and if that achievement results in some transfer of power or in partial democratization so that new demands can be made from a position of greater strength. They can be said to have failed if there is a revolutinary situation but aggressive nonviolent struggle is again and again defeated."[23] One speaks of a revolutionary situation because neither nonviolence nor violence can succeed if there is no social basis to support revolution. Thus the question whether violent revolution can be won depends upon the context. It is in the light of such a motion that one can say that liberation ethics is concerned not only with the goal of freedom but with the process of setting people free.

Hence Swomley contends that the function of liberation ethics is to provide guidelines for action that will "humanize rather than brutalize persons, that will help solve problems rather than proliferate them, and that will be useful in evaluating the methods and consequences of social change. There are always moral as well as pragmatic dilemmas in choosing a course of action that may lead to loss of lives, or to failure, or to immediate success but ultimate failure."[24]

The Reformist Strategy

As I have already pointed out, the reformist strategy seeks to change the system from within. But if change is sought from without, real success will depend on sympathies from inside. The analysis of the Apartheid regime shows that there are no sympathies for the black majority inside the ruling racial oligarchy. Even the PRP pushes for qualified franchise. For blacks such reforms are meaningless. Blacks want full political rights granted to all South Africans in a united country. They also want Apartheid structures dismantled. In short, they demand majority rule in a unitary state and, are opposed to federalism, confederalism and partition.

There are three reasons that make the use of a reformist strategy very difficult. First, there is the absence of strong external pressure. Given the unwillingness of the NP to negotiate with authentic black leaders, there is no hope for a negotiated settlement in

21. Swomley Jr., op cit, p. 11
22. Ibid
23. Ibid
24. Ibid, pp. 11, 12

South Africa. The only thing that could force the NP leadership to a negotiating table is external pressure, that is, political and economic pressure.

Second, the ruling party (NP) and opposition parties of both the right and the left are all committed to either partition or qualified franchise. They do not want one person, one vote, in a unitary state which is what constitute black political demands. Thus the black demands have no sympathisers inside Parliament.

Third, the regime is determined to suppress all extra-parliamentary forms of dissent. From 1912 to 1960, black South Africans sought peaceful means to achieve change in South Africa. They pursued reformist objectives and their methods were nonviolent. But the government responded by sending police or the army to shoot unarmed blacks and also to arrest black leaders. Thus the government's use of violence to crush opposition to its policies led blacks to answer violence with violence. This leads us to the question: To what extent can revolutionary strategy bring about social change in South Africa?

The Revolutionary Strategy

After the Sharpeville massacre on March 21, 1960, the black liberation movement adopted a revolutionary posture. Today, the radical young people are also close to doing so. But at the same time, the liberation movement made it clear that behind its revolutionary strategy lies the African National Congress (ANC) tradition of nonviolence and negotiation as a means of solving political disputes. Indeed, black leaders would agree to sit around a table and talk to white rulers, to discuss ways and means and timetables for the dismantling of Apart-

heid, but no one has asked them yet.

Given this background, the liberation movement in South Africa did not commit itself to open revolution. Rather, it outlined four forms of revolutionary strategy, namely, sabotage, guerilla warfare, terrorism and open revolution. Consistent with its political tradition, the liberation movement adopted the first method. Sabotage does not involve loss of civilian lives and, the liberation movement felt that it offered the best hope for future race relations. Proponents of such revolutionary strategy argue that it will keep bitterness to a minimum and if the strategy succeeds, a democratic government could become a reality. Although property which people will need after social change has taken place gets destroyed, the moral content of sabotage rests on the fact that civilian lives are saved.

Moreover, this strategy (sabotage) is based on the political and economic situation of South Africa, that is to say, the fact that South Africa is dependent, to a large extent, on foreign capital and foreign trade. The liberation movement thought that the destruction of power plants and telephone communications would scare away capital from the country; make it difficult for goods from industrial areas to reach the seaports on schedule; and in the long run cause a heavy drain on the economic life of the country. This strategy, in turn, would compel the white voters to reconsider their position. The attacks on the industrial installations of the country were linked with sabotage of government buildings and symbols of Apartheid. It was hoped that such attacks would serve as an inspiration to the victims of Apartheid. The plan aimed at organizing mass action which would raise sympathy for the cause of black South

Africans from other countries. The hope was that other countries would put great pressure on the South African government.

It is of vital importance to note that sabotage was adopted as a properly controlled revolutionary strategy only after a 50-year-old policy of non-violence. Against the backdrop of the ANC heritage of nonviolence and its desire for racial harmony, the liberation movement tried to avoid guerilla warfare, terrorism and open revolution on moral grounds. Guerilla warfare was avoided because guerillas tend to hide among civilians, thus compelling the military to injure civilians in search of its targets. Terrorism tends to have no political objectives. Thus terrorists kill for the sake of killing. Open revolution tends to shed a lot of blood. When outright revolution takes the form of a civil war, it leaves scars that take a long time to disappear.

Thus, the liberation movement in South Africa reflected on the results of war within South Africa's own history and realized that the scars of wars fought between white racial groups (Dutch and British) were deep, but those of wars between black groups and white groups (e.g. Battle of Blood River) went even deeper. Hence, a civil war in which blacks and whites would fight each other was to be avoided. The wounds of the Anglo-Boer war took more than 50 years before they could heal. Thus the crucial question that the liberation movement keeps on raising in South Africa is: How much longer would it take to eradicate the scars of interracial civil war, which cannot be fought without a great loss of life on both sides?

The avoidance of civil war has dominated the thinking of revolutionary strategists in South Africa. However, there is a realization that one day South Africans, black and white might have to face the prospect of a civil war. At the same time, sabotage as a strategy has not achieved its objectives except for isolated spectacular acts of sabotage in the 1980's. These include the bombing of SASOL II which is a coal gasification plant at Sasolburg on the borders of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal; the bombing of the Voortrekkerhoogte military base near Pretoria; and the bombing of a nuclear reactor at Koeberg about 45 kilometres from Cape Town. Moreover, the regime has done all in its power to circumvent acts of sabotage.

Because black South Africans do not see white South Africans as their enemies, but their oppressors, it is almost inconceivable that a revolutionary strategy can work in South Africa. Unlike the objectives of those engaged in a revolutionary strategy which are ideological, black South Africans' strategy and objectives are purely political. In other words, the former seeks to overthrow the state on ideological grounds. But the latter is committed to reordering the state in order to establish a just society. Indeed, black South Africans do not see white South Africans as enemies to be eliminated, but as fellow citizens who need a change of heart. Moreover, black South Africans want a non-racial society and, do not believe that the state is a product of social conflict and violence. Given all this, I think that J. de St. Jorre is correct when he says that revolution is not yet round the corner in South Africa but a revolutionary situation is developing. However, it is clear in terms of general principles that black South Africans want full political participation in a non-racial democracy. But I contend that the only way to achieve such objectives is through dialogue.

But dialogue will only be feasible in South Africa when the power equation is more evenly balanced which means a net loss of white power and a net gain of black power.[25] Hence, pressure from the West will play a great role in making that balance of power possible. In other words, there ought to be an interplay between the external pressure and internal resistance to Apartheid. Such a multipronged strategy will open up channels of communication and dialogue which do not exist in any adequate fashion today. This means that there ought to come a time when the U.S. government and its allies must do something more than simply issue harsh and condemnatory language with regard to what every right thinking person sees as an evil, unjust and immoral political system in South Africa. These countries should look, I think, at the interplay between the long-term and short-term considerations. The question to be raised is: Is it really in their self-interest to continue supporting the Apartheid regime which is beginning to die?

It is inevitable that the black majority will ultimately come to power in South Africa. The internal resistance has taken a new phase. In recent months there has been coordination among the opposition groups in the black community throughout South Africa. I refer here to the students' movement, grassroots-based political organizations, workers' unions, churches, and the freedom fighters' acts of sabotage. This internal resistance can generate support from abroad which ultimately could lead to a national convention of genuine black leaders, the government and other parties.

25. Ibid, p. 13
26. Turner, R. *The Eye of the Needle*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1972, pp. 117, 118