

Legitimacy and Struggle

1987

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In C. Villa-Vicencio,
ed, *Theology &
Violence: The
SA Debate (1987)*

The question of violence/non-violence as an issue for the church in South Africa cannot be addressed without reference to the social context which occasions the debate. If we take the context of the confrontation between government forces and the national resistance movement seriously we will realise that violence/non-violence is not the primary question for the church to look into. Violence is a subsidiary question of method and tactics in dealing with a problem. Methods can best be addressed by people who, at the very least, have a common diagnosis of the problem. This paper is an attempt to establish a common diagnosis. That should hopefully afford us the basis on which we can consider the most effective and acceptable methods to be used in resolving the problem. Before we explore our situation however, it will help to recall the standard position of the church on violence.

Over the ages the church has developed both a normative and a pragmatic position on violence. It opposes violence in favour of non-violent solutions to conflicts. Pragmatically, however, it accepts the use of violence on the premise of at least two presuppositions:

- A people has a right and duty to engage in the violence of national defence;
- A legitimate government has the licence of potential or actual violence for effective government.

Because of this the church has for generations blessed structures of violence in different ways, including the services of chaplains in the armed forces. It has also accommodated war through the just war theory. In South Africa as elsewhere in the world, plaques and memorials on walls and windows of cathedrals and white suburban churches stand witness to the church's sentiment over 'good violence'.

The picture alters when we consider that the South African nation as represented by the present government has no foreign enemies. Instead it is the people of South Africa and their children who, in the last few months, necessitated the largest military

mobilisation yet in the country's 'peace-time' history. Who is the aggressor and who is the defender? These questions are answered differently in South Africa depending on who you are or where you place yourself in the country's legally-determined social stratification. I suggest that the real point of dissension is here rather than concerning the traditional attitudes to violence.

Black South Africans see themselves as politically emasculated and economically dispossessed. The government of this country has never acknowledged their grievances. That is basically what the cause of violent confrontation in South Africa is about. In the course of this conflict, one of the tactics used by blacks is the refusal to be governed. At least they have made it as difficult as they possibly can for effective government to take place in their townships. The extended State of Emergency is, amongst other things, intended to restore a modicum of government control over the rebellious townships. This raises the question of the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the governed.

Many in this country believe that the government is the aggressor, and the resistance movement defensive. If this is so then the question is whether blacks have a right and duty to engage in the violence of national resistance and defence. On the other hand there are those who believe that the resistance movement is the aggressor, and the government the defender. That is so then it can be argued that the South African army is doing the job of defence and the government is rightful, exercising its licence of law-and-order violence. I discuss these issues in the following paragraphs, drawing on arguments that present a black viewpoint.

LEGITIMACY OF AUTHORITY

Historically this country's government was established through the violent conquer of the black people. Albert Luthuli was to say of the undemocratic government established

The Act of Union (of South Africa) virtually handed the whole of South Africa over to a minority of whites, lock, stock and barrel. As far as the whites were concerned the matter was settled. They had become the owners of the new state. The members of other races who found themselves handed over officially, entirely without their consent, were the livestock which went with the estate, objects rather than subjects.

Against this background the *Kairos Document* questions the churches' endorsement of the government. The document points

but that this government's mandate is a mandate to protect and serve minority interests. 'Such a mandate... is by definition hostile to the common good of all people.' In terms of this position, the government's use of law-and-order violence maintains and perpetuates tyranny. It represents a continued refusal on the part of the government to recognise that all of South Africa's people have a right and duty to participate in the political process. The government runs a country of 30 million people on behalf of a privileged 5 million. Hence it has to crush those who threaten the privileges it is elected to preserve.

The dilemma of the church is that its policy of dealing with the state is to act as if the government was in fact a government of national interest, whose legitimacy is not questioned. Where a government, by law and might, hijacks the country and its national resources for minority purposes, the church's standard policy falls short.

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Elsewhere in this volume Buti Tihagale deals with the right of a people to national defence, on the basis of the traditional just war theory of the church. From the onset he declares that his subject is a 'Black theology of self-defence'. Tihagale's argument is that in as much as the church has always acknowledged the right of peoples to national defence, black South Africans are entitled to the same understanding.

The situation as far as blacks see it, is as follows: They were conquered by force and have never willingly consented to any of the actions of the state since then. In every way they have tried to make their voice of appeal and protest heard, first to Britain (which was one of the primary purposes of founding the African National Congress in 1912), and later to successive South African governments. They see the present government and its predecessors as having no democratic mandate from them, and they believe they have a right to defend their destiny at all costs. What should the church's response be to this argument?

THE CHALLENGE FACING THE CHURCH

The membership of the church is 80 percent black. But traditionally, the church has an institutional relationship with the state. Although it has often served as a voice of conscience against state injustices, or excesses thereof, it is basically

supportive of the government. With the rise of black resistance the church has experienced a crisis of identity. The presence of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's cathedral next door to President Botha's throne dramatises the tension of the crisis. The two structures were built for mutual support, which explains the controversy that resulted when Tutu decided to break the tradition of having government guests invited to his 'enthronement' as the Archbishop of Cape Town. This crisis calls on the church to accept that black people want a different South Africa; a South Africa that reflects the love of God in human relations.

The church's identity crisis represents the crossroads that most liberal Christians, (particularly whites), are facing at this point. Many realise that the foundation of our national life is false. What the last couple of years have unveiled is a 'new factor' (to borrow a phrase from Robert McAfee Brown); 'The realisation by the powerless that they need no longer remain powerless.'

That realisation has led thousands of young people in the past decade to flee South Africa and return as targets of 'our boys of the border'. That realisation has given rise in our people, to an unquenchable thirst for freedom. They demand the right to shape the destiny of their country as responsible stewards of its God-given resources. This explains why thousands upon thousands throughout the country have risen in a sustained rebellion against the government and its structures. By so doing they have dared to confront the 'crushing might' of the most powerful military machinery in Africa. The continued military presence in the townships is an acknowledgement, however negative, that the black demand for freedom and justice remains irrevocably on the table. Will the church endorse this demand as just and fair, or will it continue to support repressive forces by claiming that the army represents a structure of 'national defence'?

It is this kind of question, I believe, that must be addressed before we deal with the matter of the ethics of violence. It must be addressed in earnest, for our positive position on it will give integrity to our voice on violence/non-violence. That is why I say the latter is a matter of tactics best handled by those with a shared perspective on the South African problem.

The controversy over 'the prayer to end unjust rule' revealed that the church is ideologically committed to the long life of this government, however unconsciously. Prayer is not overtly violent. The church has solemnly declared apartheid a heresy. What could be more faithfully Christian than to pray just as solemnly for a

speedy and happy end to such an affront to the gospel? Charles Villa-Vicencio sums up the challenge to the church in this way:

The burning question facing the English-speaking churches is whether they have fully faced the consequences of their call for the destruction of apartheid. This cannot be done without striking at the heart of the capitalist system, which in this country is built and maintained by racist legislation.⁶

The message for the church in South Africa is clear. We are called upon to be partisans of human liberation in our country. We are called upon, in God's name, to be a leaven of social salvation. Social salvation as the church's agenda in South Africa involves meaningful acts of protest against the evil of apartheid. It also involves helping the victims of apartheid to emerge from oppression. Only a church that is committed to the social revolution can heal the scars of hatred that mar the humanity of the oppressed. It is our urgent task to help lay foundations for new social relations; new life in a new South Africa for all. As Steve Biko pointed out, 'The revolutionary seeks to restore faith in life amongst all citizens of his country, to remove imaginary fears and to heighten concern for the plight of the people' (my emphasis).⁷ That is the revolutionary path of reconciliation I believe we should embrace.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Where does all this leave us as regards the question of violence? Political violence in South Africa has many dimensions. There is the violence of the state: structural violence, repressive violence, military raids on and occupation of neighbouring countries. Allied with state violence is the state-sponsored violence of the vigilantes. From the resistance movement there are guerilla operations, armed propaganda and anti-collaborationist assaults. This complexity of violence needs to be analysed carefully.

Identifying with liberation efforts does not mean a non-critical commitment. It is a call to prophetic theology, whose task goes beyond the future celebrations of national reconciliation. Prophetic theology should be a persisting critique of the best of human efforts in the light of the greater call of God's 'kingdom' which, this side of eternity, can only be approximated. In South Africa, a non-racial democracy, as opposed to the racist oligarchy that now rules, should be the social foundation for that approximation. Such a democracy, however, could only be a human approximation of the right relations God desires for us. That is

why prophetic theology will always have the role of being a 'gadfly' vis-à-vis social structures viewed in the light of the eschatological vision.

Tutu emphasises this point when he says to the oppressed 'God is on your side, not as some jingoistic national deity who says 'my people right or wrong', but as one who saves and who also judges those whom he saves'.⁶ The church's ministry of social discernment, with the tool of social analysis is to share the judgement of the saving God. Therefore, whatever the church has to say about social relations must be said after a careful exercise of the ministry of discernment. The same is true regarding the question of violence in our situation today.

The following discussion of categories of violence will hopefully broaden our understanding of political violence in order to strengthen our powers of discernment. On this subject I will be drawing from the insights of Rollo May in particular.

In *Power and Innocence*, May devotes a chapter to an 'Anatomy of Violence'. He takes the first violence of oppression as self-evident and deals with reactions to it. He points out that violence is a reaction of desperation in response to the threat to one's self-esteem:

When a person (or group of people) has been denied over a period of time what he feels are his legitimate rights, when he is continuously burdened with feelings of impotence which corrode any remaining self-esteem, violence is the predictable end result.⁷

In the language of Paul Tillich, substituting 'force' in place of violence, we could say that the latter is a means whereby being actualises itself over against the threat of non-being.⁸ Anyone who has seen young people at a funeral throw stones at an armoured vehicle spitting live bullets will understand this description of defensive violence as an act of desperation.

In his five varieties of violence, May calls the initial eruption simple violence. This is sporadic and often spontaneous violence, a fit of anger. It soon leads to the second type: calculated violence, as leadership begins to emerge and channels the energy of anger more purposefully. In South Africa, the detention without trial of thousands of people, including children, should be seen as an attempt to get rid of this naturally-emerging leadership.

The government does this in the hope of containing the violence. What happens instead is that the sense of threat to the community is heightened, and the people keep reproducing the

sometimes directionless simple violence. It is rather like chopping off the spout of a kettle because boiling water overflows through it. That does not relieve the pressure of heat which causes the boiling. Instead it makes it more difficult to deal with the water! It is not surprising that some of the township anger has led to the emergence of units of 'necklace activists'. This is part of the concern behind the call for the recognition of the accepted leaders of the people, their release from prison or return from exile and for unhindered political organisation.

The third variety in May's schema is fomented violence. This, he says, is what a Himmler or any rabble-rouser 'of the extreme right or left in any country', would occasion. The townships may have their share of this, but it arises from the desperation of impotence and political hurt.

I find the fourth type of violence described by May very destructive for the church. It is 'absentee violence (or instrumental violence)'. This is the indirect violence of those who claim innocence despite the fact that they live in and benefit from a system that perpetrates violence. To illustrate the point, May cites the many United States citizens who thought they had no part in the war even though their taxes indirectly financed human destruction in Vietnam.

Who is to blame for the numerous deaths in detention? The deaths of Biko, Pimol, Mdululi, Aggett? Nobody's to blame. Who is to blame for the orphaned children of Nyami and Mlungisi Mxenge? Nobody's to blame. Who is responsible for the deaths of the Craddock leaders? Nobody knows. How many of us are conscious of our share in the routine killings in the townships or the malnutrition and infant mortality in the bantustans? How many consider our national guilt in the destruction of families, as migrant-labour laws enforce life under animal-like conditions in the single-sex hostels? How many experience the shame of their indirect contribution to the Namibian occupation, the Angolan invasion, or the military raids on neighbouring countries?

We are involved in this violence as acquiescent tax-payers, employers, pastors and congregations, or any other category of spectators to the struggle. Izethameli, T.V. viewers, as such people are commonly known in the township.

The last of Rollo May's varieties is violence from above; what Helder Camara terms repressive violence. This transforms the police, agents of social protection, into terrorists. Citing experts in the field, May says this violence is 'regularly more destructive than

other violence — partly because the police have clubs and guns and partly because they have a large reservoir of inner individual resentment on which they can draw in their rage' (my emphasis)

IS THERE A WAY OUT?

I have argued that the question of violence is subsidiary to the question of social transformation and radical (reaching to the roots) political change in this country. I have supported that view by showing that South African Christians are not absolute pacifists. They are ready to accommodate war and violence in accordance with church tradition. I have argued that the violence of resistance becomes an issue for the institutional church realty, because it deviates from the normal pattern of accommodating state violence. The liberal English-speaking church is caught up in an awkward church-state alliance with the government although many of its members would deny this, in that the same liberal church is known to verbally support the cause of justice. Has it not roundly condemned the apartheid system as evil and contrary to the will of God?

I have argued in this essay that black political opinion recognises the resistance movement as doing a necessary duty of national defence against the self-imposed total onslaught of government machinery, and I have called on the church to judge the South African problem in the light of the black grievances of economic dispossession and political robbery. Hence I have called for the church to be a partisan of national liberation.

Through an overview of categories of violence I have tried to demonstrate the complexity of the violence in our context. I have recommended that we use the tool of social analysis in the ministry of social discernment, for the sake of social salvation. For the complex violence that is consuming our country is indicative of the prevailing social cancer of wrong relationships.

Relationships as a theological concept opens the way for the orthodox church to move towards orthopraxis. That, in a nutshell is the way out for us all as Christians. Contemporary theology has recovered the patristic (especially Eastern) idea of the mystery of the God as Trinity-in-relationship. God's self-revelation is revelation of right relationship. God's self-communication is a revelation and an extension of the relationality in love, which is within the Godhead. Through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to partake of that relationship. Hence we call ourselves

children of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, of the kingdom (kingdom) of God; a kingdom of right relationships.

The Christian faith proclaims that the God who is Right-Relationship is not to be known in the blissful pleasure of right relationship within Godself, but that this God is known as creator and source of the right relations of human beings who are made in God's relational image. Human fulfilment, the realisation of what we are meant to be, is an acknowledgement of our call to right relationships. That is the only way to be holy, to be Godly, to be Christlike. To occasion or entertain wrong relationships is the recipe for sin. The story of sin is the story of broken relationships and the need for healing, 'from the blood of Abel' to the saving blood of Jesus. For the God who is Right-Relationship emptied Godself and took human form in order to establish right human relations. Jesus thus became both the embodiment and the model of right relations.

The church, the community of Christ's disciples, is left with both the task and example of Christ in the world of sin and violence. Violence is the result of wrong relations, and often results in a worsening of those relations. This is why the church normatively opposes violent solutions to problems. Yet the church exists in an inescapably violent world and has a mission to that world. Its mission is to witness to and struggle for right relations in the world, as a pointer to the eschatological manifestation of the God who is Right-Relation.

It would therefore seem to me that the most important thing in the Christian mission, indeed in all of human life from time immemorial, is right relationship. The laws of all societies, from the most primitive to the most advanced are established to preserve right relations. Thus they are said to be just. The law of Christ is the fulfilment of all laws, for Christ is Right-Relation in the flesh. Hence his church can have no greater commitment than the cause of right relations.

What do we learn from Christ's approach to the righting of relations? We may have little access to the 'biography' of the historical Jesus. But by all accounts it is clear that he made a point of identifying with those who were the victims of wrong relationships. He engaged in constant disputes with and castigation of those responsible for wrong relationships. The second and most important feature of Jesus' method was his violent death at the hands of the violators of relationships.

The cry of the oppressed in South Africa is a cry against a state

of wrong relationships. These wrong political and economic relationships are maintained violently, with a complete denial of even the most non-violent protests. What is the church doing about this?

To follow Christ we have to be fully incarnated in the situation. We cannot sit at the pinnacle of the church tower and condemn people's responses to a violent system which we are ourselves not lifting a finger to undo. In the example of Christ we have at least two levels of operation; firstly, to identify with the victims of wrong relationships, the oppressed, and to take on their flesh as in the theological sense of incarnation. Secondly, we have to follow Christ on behalf of others suffering the violent blows of evil oppression. We have to resist evil to the bitter end. In principle, the church is expected to follow the example of Christ on both these points.

To begin with, the church must ceaselessly campaign for a radical righting of relationships in our society. This is the character of Jesus' ministry that led so many needy outcasts and marginalised of society to follow him. He emptied himself and took the form of the lowliest in society, a slave. Is it too hard for church members to leave their elevated sanctuaries and take on the form of the despised? Christ clearly and unequivocally identified with the oppressed.

It is a striking observation that while blacks are by law and tradition barred from property ownership in South Africa, the church, which is 80 per cent black, owns vast amounts of property because it 'passes for white'. Meanwhile the same church keeps quiet about black rights to land ownership in the country. It is remarkable further to observe that a church so propertied in its white identity in greater South Africa does not mind not holding full property rights for its black congregations in the townships. Township churches exist at the mercy of government officials. Clergy often report how such officials take pleasure in calling this restriction to mind in respect of churches that frequently open their buildings to be used in the cause of the oppressed.

I am alluding to structural factors that militate against the church's identifying with the oppressed but even if ties to the system could be overcome without structural changes, we have yet to follow Christ in opposing evil to the very face of death. The non-violent Christ did not shun the duty of facing the violent enemy of right relations. In doing so he himself became the victim of violence. Hence we are able to look upon Christ as the

hero of the human cause of right relationships. 'No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' (Jn.15:13). The church must take the lead and demonstrate the power of non-violence in South Africa. The oppressed must be left with no doubt as to where the church stands. Such witness may occasion the violent death of the church as we have come to know it.

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Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35,37-39)

Is there a way out? It is then not violence with which we have to deal, but social injustice. It is for us to follow Christ outside the city gates of security, even to the repelling nakedness of the cross. Many Christians in the prime of their lives have already taken that path. Through these martyrs the church lives, and from their witness we derive hope that right human relations shall yet be established.

NOTES

1. A. Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1962), p 88.
2. The Kairos theologians, *The Kairos Document* (2nd ed.), (Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1986), p 23.
3. R. McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1973), p 32.
4. C. Villa-Vicencio, 'A Reluctant Response: Has the Challenge been Heard', in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 55, June 1986, p 57.
5. S. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, (London, Bowerdean Press, 1978), p 213.
6. D. Tutu, 'The Theology of Liberation in Africa', in K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres, (eds.), *African Theology En Route*, (New York, Orbis, 1979), p 166.
7. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1972), p 182.
8. P. Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice*, (New York, OUP, 1962), p 47.