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THE SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

14.4.87

Rob Goldman,
Durban,
4000

Dear Rob,

Thanks for sending copy of the balloon affair. Sorry to be so long in responding. It would be good to know what their response to your letter was.

I am interested to see that your letter of 26.1.87 is headed "FINAL WRITTEN WARNING". This makes me think that they are dealing with you in terms of the Regulations in GG of 30.3.84, sections 48-51 (Manual p 161), because there is nothing said about "warnings" in the Section of the Act (72H) relating to "political activities". I think one needs to draw a clear distinction between these two sections. The Gazetted regulations deal only with refusal to carry out orders or fulfil duties in respect of the actual community service. It seems to me your action falls outside those limits and they have no grounds for warning you. Alternatively, if they are trying to treat it as a political action in breach of Sec 72H of the Act then you should be prosecuted, not warned. Also, if the Min of Defence can be trusted when speaking in Parliament, it is only party political activity that was in mind in Sec 72H.

I can see that Family Planning might find it embarrassing, as a Govt. Dept., to have a demonstrator in their midst. An AWB maniac might have the same effect on them, and their public image. Then there might be cause for getting you transferred to another department of State etc. Which you may not want.

There are no other cases that I know of like this. Please keep a record of the whole thing, as I'm sure you will, in case the next victim needs advice.

Yours sincerely,

Rob

P.S. I thought it best not to mention you by name in the latest New-V. News. Paul gave me the quotation which I hope is correct.

THE CHURCHES AND THE BRO (BOARD FOR RELIGIOUS OBJECTION)

1. Personal background

- Methodist, Anglican, Anabaptist, Christian trying to work out what faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ in relation to this issue means.
- been a fairly long road, from late 70's, non-combatant, 'til now, doing CS.
- was involved in COSG from inception, ongoing ad hoc counselling of conscripts, currently National Co-ordinator of NCSG and also connected with another organisation in Durban which is concerned with conscription issues.

2. Positive aspects of the legislation for us who can do CS

The major part of what I want to focus on tonight is a critical look at the role of the churches with regards to the BRO and related legislation.

But to prevent you from gaining the impression that I am entirely critical (which I am not) I'd first like to mention a few positive aspects for us who have been recognised by the BRO and are now doing CS.

2.1 Doing CS in state, provincial or local authority depts is very definitely an improvement on spending that time in the military. The objectives and values of the military are directly opposed to what we believe as objectors. While we believe in wholeness and respect for life in the military we either learn to kill or do a support job so that other people can kill. And for us in this civil war context being forced to put on the uniform and enter the townships is even more traumatic.

On the other hand state, provincial or l.a. depts where I and other objectors have been placed are for the most part genuinely making a positive, life-giving contribution to society. While we may still be faced with contradictions & inconsistencies, the context in which we live them out is far more consistent with who we are than is the army.

This is especially true for younger conscripts straight from school, maybe not strong or mature enough to stand up to the breaking-down methods of the military machine. I've been through it, the experience strengthened me, but I've also seen it break people.

2.2 We as CO's obviously hold a strong commitment to our beliefs and we try to view our time of CS as an opportunity to live these out, witness to them, share them, encourage others to join us in them, 'subvert' our workplace, if you will. We who are Christians believe the gospel of Christ is the most subversive message this world has ever heard & we have the opportunity to be witnesses to it, with integrity, in our places of work.

2.3 In a much broader sense, CS, as opposed to jail or exile (I'm not implying these are any less noble or valid choices) is an opportunity to live out our beliefs in the broader society and to work for the peace and justice of God's kingdom which we so fervently believe in.

3. Problems with the current system

Thesis: The church has played the role of powerful collaborator with the state and persecutor of conscripts, rather than powerless prophet to the state and pastor of conscripts.

(By 'church' I include myself... serious reservations, no option, black armband, ongoing discussion within CSG, now mandatory 6 yrs prison, it seems)

Another way of putting my thesis is this: the state has successfully co-opted the church & the church is now seen to be giving credibility to a BRO & related legislation which do not deserve or merit that credibility.

I firmly believe that the early (pre-1983 Defence Amendment Act) CO's who sacrificed their freedom and went to jail, did not do so for this narrow legislation and its instrument the BRO, and the harsh punishment (harsher than before) for those who don't pass the BRO's test.

No, they went to jail with a broader vision in mind, with a more noble dream in their hearts. In the words of M.L. King, they went to the mountain top, they saw the promised land, but we don't see it here yet, and the BRO certainly bears no resemblance to it!

The challenge still before the church is this: to transform CO legislation & its instruments into something just and fair,

We must not allow the early CO's vision to perish. We must allow their witness & deeds of courage to challenge us to once again critically examine & re-evaluate our relationship with the BRO.

Allow me to share with you a few of the problems I have with the BRO, and the churches' relationship to it.

3.1 The whole thing is the wrong way round - people should justify why they do want to kill, not don't! Political prisoners are let out of jail because they renounce violence, while political objectors are put in jail for the same declaration!

Seriously, if we accept the premise that there needs to be a tribunal or whatever to judge a person's sincerity, then it must at least present the facade of being neutral and unbiased, ie no military presence! It is unfair to expect a military person to be neutral about someone who is telling him why he objects to being part of his organisation!

The BRO clearly is a biased instrument, and the church is seen to be supporting that bias.

3.2 A second problem we need to address is the underlying presupposition that CS is not true national service. There is a mentality in the framers and the executors of the legislation that national service is no less & no more, but equal to, military service. And we should be jolly grateful because we could be in jail. This way of thinking is indeed a sad indignity on the militaristic spirit which pervades our society including its elected and public officials.

Two quotes will suffice to illustrate the depth of this problem:

The first is from the Director-General, Manpower, Dr P.J. van der Merwe

"...those persons who object to military service in any form...do community service as an alternative to being detained in detention barracks. Community service must therefore not be compared to national service (my emphasis)".

The second is from Mr P. du Plessis: I quote from the Natal Mercury 8/8/87 "Replying to the debate on his vote of the Budget, (the Minister of Manpower) said he was giving attention to the placement of religious objectors. It was not always easy to find them suitable positions because of the opposition to religious objectors by some people. Mr du Plessis said these people had his sympathy because he could understand why someone would not want to be taught by a teacher, for example, who refused to serve his country."

We need to ask to what extent the church can and is countering this mentality.

3.3 The church is supporting an instrument which, on its performance record up to now, operates on the basis of a false dichotomy between 'religious' and 'political', which thinking can be found only in the most borderline religious groupings, and certainly not in the teaching of the mainline denominations. It seems to be based on a strict interpretation of Martin Luther's two-kingdom theory, but even Luther said "If you preach the gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you are not preaching the gospel at all."

3.4 Furthermore it is strange that the churches have collaborated with the BRO

in its restrictive 'religious pacifist' parameters. For the just war doctrine rather than pacifism more closely resembles the position of the main line churches. It is exactly this doctrine which is excluded from the parameters of the BRO in a water-tight fashion, and yet the churches participate in judging conscripts in the light of a doctrine (pacifism) which none of them officially embrace! The churches are being untrue to their own history and teaching.

- 3.5 The result is that the church is seen to be playing an active role in the persecution of its non-pacifist members, and of objectors who hold political or non-religious pacifist views. Surely there are whiffs of Constantinianism in the air and alarm bells should be ringing!

Thus the church is playing a part in forcing conscripts to make one of a number of choices against their will:

- to lie to the BRO in order to get through
- to go into the SADF against their deeply held convictions & values, with often severe consequences.
- to live a life on the run, always dreading the prospect of finding a brown envelope in the post-box.
- going to prison for up to 6 years - even more severe than our dreaded enemy, the USSR.
- going into exile, often as lonely and alienating as prison.

We need to soberly examine & acknowledge our responsibility for the damage being done to the lives of young men who are forced into these choices.

Once we acknowledge & confess our complicity we must then take appropriate action to back up our words. And so to my concluding point.

4. Discussion questions

To help us grapple with what action to take, I pose two questions for discussion:

If we accept that the BRO & related legislation as they currently stand, and the churches' role in these, are not acceptable, then,

- 1) what can we do to improve the system?
- 2) until the system is improved to our satisfaction, what steps can we take to lessen the credibility we are currently affording the system?

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