

For decades blacks have tried to change matters by constitutional and peaceful means. Their attempts have been fruitless, because of the violent reprisals by the government of the day. Bannings, detentions without trial and shootings have removed all hope of peaceful change. Dare we be surprised if blacks turn to violent means? This is exactly what many have done. Those who go up to fight for the SADF on the border should remember that they are fighting against their own deeply disaffected fellow-citizens. They are taking part in a highly partisan civil war. It is as Lyndon Johnson said: Those who make pacific revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable.

Young men are being required increasingly to risk their lives under arms. Many, like myself, are already asking: Just what are we fighting for? Just what are we being required to die for? Are we going to die for a better society, for a more just society, perhaps even for a more loving society? Are we really defending the last bastion of Christianity, as we are so often told? Is this that we are defending really to be termed "civilisation", as against its alternative "barbarism", as again we are told by those who are left cold by the extraordinarily barbaric death of Steve Biko? There is a mockery in all of this. We fail to see that it is our own vices that are thrown back in our face by the revolutionary movements.

4. Churches support selective conscientious objection

There is a cloud of witnesses to support my understanding of the situation. Archbishop Denis Hurley (Ecunews, 11.9.74) said that "the unjust situation in South Africa makes it justifiable for young South Africans to refuse to fight on the borders. It is our duty to discourage people from getting involved in this military conflict because of the realities of the South African situation -- a situation of oppression". Archbishop Bill Burnett said in 1975 that "we need to grasp the significance of the fact that some Black South Africans, many of whom are Christians, are outside our country seeking to change our power structure by force". In March 1979 he said even more explicitly: "Unless things change significantly I would be unable in conscience to defend a system of government which, in spite of many good features, has a basis which is indefensible and produces fruit which is unjust and cruel".

The Catholic Bishops declare that "we defend the right of every individual to follow his own conscience, the right therefore to conscientious objection both on the grounds of universal pacifism and on the grounds that he seriously believes the war to be unjust." The Anglican Synod of Cape Town (1977) upheld the archbishop's statement that "the society we have created for ourselves is morally indefensible. This is very serious at a time when we are being asked to defend it". It went on: "We sympathise with those who in conscience believe that it is an act of disobedience to God to be part of the military structures of this country, because they are convinced that by doing so they would be defending what is morally indefensible. We accept that we, as a Church, have a positive duty to make all people aware of what is involved in being used to defend the morally indefensible and to challenge each other in the cost of discipleship, putting first the claims of Christ over all our being and doing".

In October 1979 the Baptist Union Assembly requested that the authorities provide a non-military alternative to military service for conscientious objectors. In September 1979 the Presbyterian Church affirmed solidarity of fellowship to any member of the church penalized following refusal to do military service. It insisted that Christians had to reject as blasphemous a view that they should not venture into debate on bearing arms, the defence of the country or conscientious objection because of the risk of prosecution.

5. Rejection of non-combatant medical service in the unit.

It is against this background that my refusal to attend the camp must be seen. I understand that I am required to be a medical officer in the unit from now on. In 1977, when I was a conscientious objector for the first time, I did not request non-combatant status but instead a "period of service of national interest under civilian direction". The latter phrase is crucial. Being a medic does in no way absolve one from the serious moral compromise which I have explained above. A medic is a necessary part of the war machine; he too makes a direct contribution to the strength of the fighting force.

Therefore I find it impossible even to be a medical officer.

In the 1976 Parliamentary debate on the Defence Budget, J.J. Vilonel said "It would be ridiculous to argue about which division of the Defence Force is really the most important. The fact is that they are all important and that they are all essential. One important and essential division of the Defence Force is the Medical Corps. Not only does this corps play a vital role with regard to the health and physical preparedness of our men, but also with regard to the services it provides to the dependants, its welfare work and its role in regard to the wounded in wartime (Hansard, 1976: cols 6243 and 6245). He has argued my case very well. If it is morally repugnant to be a fighting member of the SADF, then to be a medical officer is likewise problematic.

6. (Peter Moll then quotes a poem by Alan Paton: CAPRIVI LAMENT - see overleaf).

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) Peter Moll

(Some quotations from the first part of the letter: -

"Martin Luther held to the above principle when he declared to the authorities, 'Here I stand, I can do no other'.

Calvin wrote in his Institutes, Book Four, Chapter XX, 32:

'We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it'.

The Baptist Confession of 1646 stated 'It is the magistrate's duty to tender the liberty of men's consciences, without which all other liberties would not be worth the naming. Neither can we forbear the doing of that, which our understandings and consciences bind us to do. And if the magistrates should require us to do otherwise, we are to yield our persons in a passive way to their power. But if any man shall impose on us anything that we see not to be commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ, we should rather die a thousand deaths, than to do anything against the light of our own consciences'.

"The conservative Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk has also made a case for civil disobedience in the past. Early this century it declared, 'No-one may revolt against lawful authority other than for carefully considered and well-grounded reasons based on the word of God and a conscience enlightened by the Word of God' (see de Gruchy, The Church struggle in South Africa, p.225)."

CAPRIVI LAMENT

Makwela, Ikgopoleng, and you two Sihekos,
what were you fighting for?
Makwela, was it for your house in Springs
and your security of tenure?
Or did you fight for me and my possessions
and this big room where I write to you,
a room as big as many houses?

Sibeko of Standerton, what did you die for?
Was it for the schooling of your children?
Were you so hungry for their learning
or were you fighting for the rich grand schools
of my own children?

Sibeko of Bloemfontein, was it for those green pastures
of your own Free State country
that you poured out your young man's blood?
Was it for the sanctity of family life
and the infinitude of documents?
Or were you fighting to protect me
and my accustomed way of life?

Ikgopoleng of Lichtenburg,
was it South Africa you fought for?
Which of our nations did you die for?
Or did you die for my parliament
and its thousand immutable laws?
Did you forgive us all our trespasses
in that moment of dying?

I was not at your gravesides, brothers,
I was afraid to go there.
But I read the threnodial speeches
how you in life so unremembered
in death became immortal.

Away with your threnodial speeches, says the Lord.
Away with your solemn assemblies.
When you lift up your hands in prayer
I will hide my eyes from you.
Cease to do evil and learn to do right,
pursue justice and champion the oppressed.

I saw a new heaven and a new earth
for the first heaven and earth had passed away
and there was an end to death
and to mourning and crying and pain
for the old order had passed away.

Is that what you died for, my brothers?

Or is it true what they say
that you were led into ambush?

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(The poem relates to the reported death in ambush in the Caprivi Strip of 4 black soldiers of the SADF.)

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