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A HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SOUTH AFRICAN BAPTIST UNION AND MILITARY CONSCRIPTION INTO THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the way in which Baptists in South Africa have responded to participation in the military service of the South African Defence Force.

Special attention will be given to the question of Baptists and Conscientious/Religious Objection, post Soweto 1976.

A Definition of Baptists used for the purpose of the paper

At the outset it is important to define the term Baptists as applied for the purpose of this study.

Compulsory conscription in SA applies to the white-male population only.

White Baptist males are therefore more affected by conscription than any other group.

White Baptist males are predominantly members of the Baptist Union of South Africa (B.U.S.A.) and the Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk (A.B.K.).

Not only does the B.U. encompass those Baptists that are eligible for conscription but also represents part of that Christian tradition which on Biblical/theological grounds (Rom.13) perceives the governing authorities of a State to be divinely appointed by God.

This theological tradition has concrete implications therefore on the relationship between Baptists and the Apartheid Government in general and for our purpose concerning military conscription in particular.

Although the S.A.B.U. encompasses most "Coloured", Indian and a few Black Baptist churches its power base is nevertheless deeply entrenched in the white membership, representing predominantly white-middle-class interests as protected and maintained amongst others by the S.A.D.F.

The above statement is based on the facts that for example until 1988 all B.U. presidents were members of the white population, that most B.U. executive and other leadership positions are occupied by whites, until recently theological education was ethnically and racially divided with the white Colleges offering more advanced academic education, that the majority of the black membership known as the Baptist Convention broke its ties with the B.U. in 1987, there are indications of longstanding disgruntlement amongst some "coloured" and Indian Baptists with the "white" establishment. The tale of the Baptist Alliance furthermore proves the above statement undoubtedly.

A History of Military conscription in South Africa

Compulsary conscription in S.A. was introduced in 1912, suspended during the two World Wars and re-introduced in 1967.

Marked by the national independence of Angola and Mozambique as well as the war in Namibia the length of national service was increased from 9 to 12 months followed by regular camps.

Post Soweto, 1976 saw the additional intensification of militarisation under the concept "total strategy".

Conscription was increased, national service was doubled to 24 months, the "war" was no longer limited to the border areas but SADF troops were increasingly occupying the townships.

RESISTENCE TO CONSCRIPTION AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR CONSC.OBJECTION

The beginning of organised opposition to conscription

It was against this increase in militarisation that simultaneously resistance to the role of the SADF and conscription occurred.

The military defence of Apartheid inside the borders was perceived as an expression of violence and thereby became an issue of conscience, relating directly to those eligible for conscription both in and outside the churches.

In response to this awareness individuals began to follow their conscience and refused to serve in the SADF.

For many this meant leaving the country, others were confronting the issue head-on.

Two of those early objectors were Baptists.

Peter Moll and Richard Steele both members of the Claremont Baptist Church in Cape Town objected to serve in the SADF on the grounds that the ethics of the Christian-faith is conflicting with the objectives of the SADF.

B.U. Resolutions on Conscientious Objection in 1974 and 1979

After dissociating itself from the SACC's 1974 Hammanskraal statement on military conscription and conscientious objection the B.U. following the Johannesburg Assembly in 1979 issued a resolution on Conscientious Objection which coincided with the time of Moll and Steele's objection.

The B.U.'s 1974 resolution ^{REASONABLY} stated that it.....

- * dissociating itself from advocating conscientious objection as a means of protest to the political-social status quo.
- * reaffirming its support for S.A.D.F. chaplains.

The 1979 resolution....

- * reaffirmed the right of the State to conscript its citizens.
- * recognized the right of individuals to object on the grounds of conscience.
- * called for an easing of the law affecting objectors which are not members of the so-called peace churches for which such provision is made.
- * asked to make provision for objectors to serve as an alternative in some civilian capacity.

At the same time the B.U. attempted to meet directly with the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence to discuss the resolution, however this was done independently from the issues concerning Moll and Steele.

There is no evidence to suggest that the B.U. was making direct representation and intervening on behalf of Moll and Steele.

It seems there was a concrete lack in reconciling the intentions of the resolution with the challenge of the real-life situation.

In 1980 the two Baptist objectors were sentenced to the harsh and inhumane punishment of 12 months detention barracks including repeated solitary confinement.

The 1983 Defence Amendment Act

Under pressure of the ever increasing resistance to conscription the Government in 1983 introduced the Defence Amendment Act, making provision for alternative form of conscription.

In essence this Act was discriminatory and punitive as it provided provision for objection on purely religious grounds vs. conscientious objection. This provisions were for universal pacifists only.

The Act was punitive insofar as the alternative service extended over a period of one-and-a-half times the actual military service.

Non-religious objectors were served prison sentences up to six years.

Intensified resistance to conscription and the B.U. response

1983 saw not only the Defence Amendment Act but also witnessed the launch of the End of Conscription Campaign (ECC) which was to be a broad umbrella body to express opposition to conscription.

Although the campaign gained support from groups such as the Black Sash, NUSAS, UDF, YCS the support of the churches was limited to the Quakers, Methodist and Anglican social action groups.

By and large the churches response continued to be predominantly restricted to the passing of resolutions which failed to create structures whereby the military issues could be actively taken up.

The same limitations are observable in the ranks of the B.U.

The Christian Citizen Committee of the B.U. is known to have made twice written representation in 1985 to the Minister of Defence and the Geldenhuys Committee expressing the shortcomings of the Amendment Act 1983, their representation was based on a SACC memorandum on the subject.

However the same representation also pointed out...

- * that the B.U. does normally not identify with the SACC
- * makes reference to the 'present laws of this Christian country' thereby reaffirming the "Christianness" of the Apartheid authorities.
- * that community service should not become a 'soft option' for Conscientious Objectors.

On the grounds of the above historical sketch it may be concluded that the B.U.'s approach to the militarisation issue was restricted to resolutions as well as representations to and before the relevant state authorities. There was no direct, participatory relation between the B.U. and the various public campaigns against militarisation such as the 'Declaration to End Conscription' 1984, 'No War in Namibia' 1984, 'Troops Out of the Townships' 1985, 'Fast for a Just Peace' 1985, 'Working for a Just Peace' 1986, 'Let ECC Speak' 1986.

Even in the light of the 1986 State of Emergency legislation which prohibited the open campaigning against conscription there is no evidence that the B.U. stepped up its pressure in response to this militarist repression.

The pattern of making resolutions continued as ever before.

In fact, it was during that time that the B.U. send a delegation to meet with P.W. Botha, an act which amongst its white middle-class membership was hailed as an achievement, amongst the more politically aware members it was but another sign of the B.U.'s consistent pattern of playing into the hands of the Apartheid regime.

The B.U.'s justification for doing things the way they do is generally defended on the grounds of freedom of conscience.

It is argued that whatever statement it makes, is not necessarily representative since Baptists are allowed to differ on issues, including such as militarisation and compulsory conscription.

This point is well illustrated by the Rev. G.R. Trew in his testimonial letter on behalf of Richard Steele when he points out that "The great majority of our (Baptists) young men serve or have served in the armed services and a number of our ministers serve as chaplains in the Defence Force. However it is one of our fundamental principles which Baptists throughout history have held and hold today, that every man must be free to obey the dictates of his own conscience before God."

Freedom of conscience is indeed one of the Baptist pillars, however this paper argues that the right to conscience must be premised on the assumptions of an informed conscience, i.e. awareness of all the options and choices available.

Likewise this paper argues that this is the precise point at which the Baptist Union of South Africa has failed.

It is the opinion of the present writer that the beliefs and practices of the B.U. are conservative precisely because it serves in the interest of its white middle-class aspirations. These aspirations and interests are not vague and abstract, they are well known especially to the "custodians" of the National Executive.

It is no surprise therefore to find a predominantly positive response towards the SADF, since it maintains these interests.

* So far we established that undoubtedly the B.U. has not lacked in making resolutions, often quite critical of the Apartheid laws. However the crux of the matter is the lacking preparedness to questioning the very authority and legitimacy of the National Party Government.

The legitimacy of the S.A. government is taken as a given Biblical/theological principle which at the same time happens to be a viable economic and political option.

* We also established the way in which the principle of liberty of conscience is applied one-sidedly, for the purpose and propagation of middle-class interests, - predominantly White.

In order to avoid a meaningless, circular debate about how/ or how not, the principle of liberty of conscience is one-sidedly applied we shift the discussion to the old and well-known saying 'actions speak louder than words'.

'ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS'

A History of South African Baptist participation in War

We turn to a brief historical study, looking at the relationship between Baptists and military service and conscientious objection, not in terms of resolutions, but concrete action.

Indeed the Rev. G.R. Trew's statement in the Testimonial for Richard Steele's trial is very representative of white Baptists when he pointed out that "the great majority of our young men serve or have served in the armed forces and a number of our ministers serve as chaplains in the Defence Force."

Baptist involvement in the wars of South Africa goes right back to the 1820 Settlers and stretches across history to the present day. Some were enthusiastic soldiers, others devoted chaplains and a few courageous conscientious objectors. But they all were Baptists.

The 1820 Settlers

Ironically the very existence of Baptists in S.A. is closely tied up with the colonial war (Frontier War) against the Xhosa.

The earliest Baptist families in South Africa, ie. Miller, Nelson, Kidwell, Prior, Ford were part of the 1820 immigration scheme of the British colonial power that brought Settlers out here in reponse to the ongoing clashes with the Xhosa's at the Eastern Cape Frontier. The 1820 Settlers were meant to create a buffer zone at the Great Fish River in the light of the fifth Frontier War.

The motives of those Settlers were clear.

In the light of the increasingly harsh living conditions in Britain the prospect of becoming a landowner in the colonial eastern Cape seemed attractive enough even though the land had to be taken away and fought for from the indigenous Xhosa's.

The Baptist Settlers were not exempted from being attracted by these prospects.

These political and economic interests are directly related to warfare and militarism and form part of the founding history of Baptists in South Africa.

Against the above background it is therefore not surprising to find great military zealously even amongst some of those early Baptists.

At the time of the ninth and last Frontier war in 1877, members of the Grahamstown Baptist church were amongst the volunteers ready to take on the Xhosa's.

One of the most enthusiastic man in that battlefield was the Rev G W Cross, minister of the Grahamstown church.

Amongst South African Baptist Union historians he is mostly presented as a great man of God and remembered for his military services both as a trooper and spiritual worker.

Baptists in the Anglo-Boer War

Although there were no permanent Baptist chaplains some nevertheless served as volunteers.

Baptists Chaplains and soldiers during the First World War

During the First World War Baptists formed parts of various troops involved in military activities.

This war also saw the inception of the first three Baptist chaplains on a permanent basis serving the Forces in East Africa and France.

Baptist Chaplains during the second World War

At the outset of this war the B.U. had appointed two full-time and one reserve chaplain.

By 1944 the number increased to thirteen, and after the war one peace-time chaplain was maintained in the Defence Force.

Baptist Chaplains since the two World Wars

By 1978 the SADF in total consisted of 533 chaplains of which 16 were Baptists, divided into the Permanent-, National Service-, Citizen-, Commando Force and Part-time chaplains.

A study of the history of Baptist chaplains in the SADF indicates that many of them have gained respect and praise in military and church circles, were awarded distinguished orders, received medals and high ranks such as Captain, Mayor, Colonel, Brigadier, Senior Chaplain and Senior Staff Officer and wore their uniforms with great pride in the service of both God and South Africa!

One contemporary B.U. historian completes his study on the Baptist Chaplains with the words "We thank God for the role of our chaplains through the years and, if the senselessness of war must persist it is good to know that men of compassion and spiritual dynamics are there to minister to the cream of the country".

~Cream of the country~ seemingly referring to those serving in the Defence Force!

The above section of this paper has beyond doubt illustrated the positiveness in which service in the military Force has been predominantly viewed amongst the white Baptist in South Africa.

In the history of the Baptist Union, militarism and the fighting in unjust wars from the Cape Frontiers to Namibia and the occupation of Townships under the prevailing State of Emergency has been an integrated part of following and serving God uncompromisingly according to the divine dictates to the believer's conscience.

So integrated seems this tradition to be that those Baptists serving in the Forces are not only considered to be the "saved children of God", but also the ~cream of the nation~.

Not only has the Baptist Union been a faithful supplier of conscripts to the SADF but in the course of history has also revealed its positive outlook towards the Army in other ways.

The two most recent examples are the hosting of the 1989 B.U. Assembly in Kimberley which was scheduled to take place at the Army Base of the SADF.

Furthermore, the president-nominee for the upcoming 1990 B.U. Assembly is none other than Brigadier Andrew van den Aardweg, High-ranking Baptist chaplain in the SADF Permanent Force.

THE ALTERNATIVE ~CREAM OF THE NATION~

Although the above study so far allows to draw the conclusion that in practice the position of the Baptist Union and its leadership has been positive, and supportive of the SADF there is also the indication of an alternative cream of the nation, those whose conscience has led them to be more critical of the military.

Baptist Religious Objectors since 1984

We have already referred to the two pioneer Baptist conscientious objectors, Peter Moll and Richard Steele in the late 1970's.

They both have been an example to many more who subsequently have taken the daring step of conscientious and religious objection. A few were Baptists.

Since the inception of the 1983 Defence Amendment Act until January 1990 22 white Baptist conscripts have become classified religious objectors.

* Of these 22 a total of 13 classified under category One which made provision to enter the SADF in a non combatant form.

* A total of 2 classified under category Two making provision to enter the SADF in a non-combatant form without having to wear a military uniform.

* A total of 7 classified under category Three making provision for non-military, alternative service outside the Defence Forces.

These figures indicate predominantly two trends.

a.) On the one hand it is encouraging to see a small number of Baptists objecting to serve in the SADF.

Their stance is even more daring considering the fact that within their churches they are a minority, and confronted by a status-quo that can accommodate their decision to some extent yet in the final analysis begs to differ.

b.) On the other hand the number of Baptist objectors is still very small, considering that between 1984-89 a total of approx. 450 objected, excluding the Jehovah Witness.

It is even more discouraging to note that out of the 22 only 7 objected to any form of participation in the SADF structures. An indication that there is still little questioning of the army's function to maintain Apartheid.

In addition it is unfortunate that the Baptist objectors by and large isolate themselves from support-structures that represent the same cause. In general there seems to be little connection between their religious objection and the broader, more active anti-military movement and political engagement.

Not only is the alternative ~cream of this country~ restricted to those Baptists that object to conscription.

Anti-Militarism beyond conscription

A clear anti-SADF spirit was embodied in the eight members at the Kimberley Assembly when in protest to the venue at the SADF Base a walk-out led to a crisis which climaxed in a change of venue.

The proposal to change the venue was taken to the ballot which resulted in a vote count of 126 for and 103 against, a sad indication of how deeply entrenched the B.U. is in its pro-military outlook.

This observation is all the more legitimate taking into consideration the lengthy apologetic statement the Assembly issued subsequently.

The statement went to great pains affirming that the relocation of the venue should not be seen or construed as a political act, as an endorsement of the position taken by those who walked out, nor as a criticism of the SADF and the Baptist chaplains.

What is most painful to realize is that not even a crucial experience such as the Kimberly episode led to a genuine willingness amongst the "custodians" of the B.U., to learn humbly and to begin to listen to the non-militarist tradition of the Baptist faith.

CONCLUSION

Against the above findings one is led to wonder what are the motives behind this mostly positive working relation between the B.U. establishment and the SADF ?

One answer seems to be directly related to the theology of the Baptist Union which has become distorted in the course of a history that since its beginning in this country has concerned itself with taking over the land and the riches, holding selfishly on to privileges and benefits of the white minority.

In many ways Baptist thinking on the issue of military service has not changed since the time of the 1820 Settlers.

As keen as the Rev G W Cross and some of his members at the Grahamstown church were to give their very best as soldiers in the war against the Xhosas, so the spirit of these early colonial Baptists seem to live on amongst the predominantly white "custodian" of the B.U.

Likewise the motives have not changed much.

In conclusion, the quest for land and riches, the maintenance of white-and-middle-class interests and the ~~perseverance~~^{PRESERVANCE} of Western values, Capitalism and the ideology of Conservative Christianity are still the dictates of the conscience that allows the majority of white Baptists in the name of God for participation in the SADF.

Acknowledgement of resources:

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