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CONSCIENCE IN CONFLICT.

Views on war, violence and non-violence in South Africa.

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A historical case-study.

At its annual National Conference in 1974 the South African Council of Churches took a resolution on conscientious objection (1) which caused a great stir in its member bodies and in South African society in general. Parliament discussed the resolution at length. Eventually it passed new legislation on military service.

Which were the reasons for all this excitement? A short glance at the main contents of the resolution gives the answer. It emphasises obedience to God alone and the obligation of the Christian to refuse obedience to the government if it serves evil and oppression.

By implication the resolution justifies the aim of the liberation movements which intend overthrowing the present power structures of the Republic of South Africa. This, at least, is a conclusion which can be drawn from the way in which the resolution refers to the well known biblical passage Luke 4:18.

The same conclusion can be derived from the way in which the resolution compares the struggle of the present liberation movements in Southern Africa with the liberation struggle of the Afrikaans Republics during the First and the Second War of Independence. The SACC National Conference states: "if we have justified the Afrikaners' resort to violence (or the violence of the imperialism of the English) or claimed that God was on their side, it is hypocritical to deny that the same applies to the black people in their struggle today;" (2)

South African society is described in the resolution as a fundamentally unjust and discriminatory society. For the South African churches this evaluation of South African society is considered to have moral implications. They are advised to challenge their members to consider "whether Christ's call to take up the Cross and follow Him in identifying with the oppressed, does not in our situation involve becoming conscientious objectors."

In connection with this recommendation the SACC calls upon the churches to reconsider also the basis on which military chaplains are employed in the South African defence force "and to investigate the state of pastoral care available to the communicants at present in exile or under arms beyond our borders and to seek ways and means of ensuring that such pastoral care may be properly exercised." If we want to understand the intensity of the excitement that the SACC caused by this resolution we have to consider it in the context of South African legislation on military service, as valid at that time (1974), and of the military situation. Legislation on military service laid down that exemption may be granted to adherents of religious groups which reject participation in war. The religious groups to which this regulation applies are not specifically mentioned. Exemption from military service is not a right accruing to adherents of certain religious groups. It is a privilege depending on the discretion of the military official concerned. The exemption does not comprise exemption from serving in the army nor exemption from military training under arms.

At the time when the resolution was taken, South Africa was already secretly or openly engaged in military conflicts beyond its borders, namely in Rhodesia. The statement was thus made at a time when the South African state placed the highest priority on military preparedness. The need for such preparedness is officially propagated according to a 'holy war' concept maintaining that South Africa has the task to fight for Christian values and the Christian tradition of Western nations against Communism.

For the representatives of South African churches at the National Conference of the SACC in 1974 the effects which the resolution on Conscientious Objection could have, were foreseeable. In the white constituency of the churches the resolution was a controversial issue. In Parliament it found opposition among members of all parties. As a result of the resolution, Parliament passed an amendment to the Defence Act (3) which makes it very difficult to discuss conscientious objection without being liable to prosecution.

In passing such legislation, Parliament deviated from the practice during the First and the Second World Wars in which the individual was allowed to ~~take~~ a personal decision whether he or she would participate or not participate actively in the war.

I. Participation in war as a moral issue.

The 19th Century is marked by numerous conflicts between whites and blacks in Southern Africa. On the whole the question whether these wars were justified was not considered. In some cases it was claimed that the black people had to be subjected to white rule for the sake of establishing peace in Southern Africa. There was no agreement as to the question who should subjugate the black people and control them: The Afrikaner republics or the British colonies and the British Empire. In isolated cases, missionaries or church leaders raised the question whether the wars of conquest were justified.

At the turn of the 19th century the war of the British Empire against the two Afrikaner republics was regarded in white circles of different West European countries as an unjust war. Even in Britain there was considerable opposition to the war. The methods of war applied in the conflict between the British and the Afrikaners in South Africa were criticised. Emily Hobhouse, a pacifist lady of Anglican background, undertook a campaign to draw the attention of the British public to the concentration camps and especially to the suffering of women and children (4). She was highly respected among the Afrikaans people. In 1926 her ashes were buried at the foot of the Women's Monument at Bloemfontein, one of the great national monuments of the Afrikaans people (5)

At the time of the Anglo-Boer war the question whether the war was justified or not was a widely discussed problem. The reports on the war gave rise to thought in South Africa and overseas on the question, as to what methods may be used or not be used in warfare. More than 10.000 Afrikaans men who were citizens of the British colonies in South Africa participated in the Anglo-Boer War on the side of the Republics.(6)

4/.....These men

These men were conscious of an obligation to arrive at a personal decision whether they should take part in the war and on which side they should fight during the war. To many of them it was a decision of conscience. They could not decide to fight on the side of the Republics without at the same time being aware that in doing so, they were regarded as rebels in the British colonies in which they were at home. To them fighting on the side of the Afrikaans Republics entailed refusal of loyalty to the government of the respective British colony.

A personal decision was also demanded from the Afrikaans men engaged in warfare as to whether and how long they should continue to participate in the war. No unanimity was reached on this issue. After the capitals of the two Boer Republics had been occupied by the British troops, a number of Afrikaans men decided that they were bound to stop fighting in order to preserve the Afrikaans people from being completely destroyed and wiped out. Some of them now supported the British forces. In many a church congregation they were regarded as traitors. In some Afrikaans congregations there was great reluctance after the war to admit such church members to Holy Communion(7)

In the course of the negotiations which led to the treaty of Vereeniging it was difficult for the leaders of the Afrikaner republics to reach a decision whether fighting should be continued. In view of the tremendous loss of life in the concentration camps some Afrikaner leaders felt a moral obligation to come to terms with the British Empire, even if this meant the loss of the independence of the Afrikaner Republics. This was the line of thinking in the arguments of General Smuts. On this occasion he held a speech, which was one of the most brilliant and decisive ones of his whole career. He argued that it was not justifiable to continue with the fight for the independence of the Afrikaans people if the continuation of the war meant that the people on whose behalf it was fought, was in danger of being wiped out. "We must not sacrifice the nation itself on the altar of independence," he said.(8)

General Smuts was not a pacifist. He was, however, deeply concerned about ensuring peace in international relationships. He shared this concern with Quakers in Great Britain, among whom he had close friends. With them he also discussed his philosophy of holism(9) which was the background of his political career and of his efforts to find, define and ensure a role for South Africa in the context of the British Commonwealth of Nations and the League of Nations.

Since General Smuts has been a leading figure in South African politics for several decades after the end of the Anglo-Boer War it is worthwhile to take account of his political ideals and of their relevance to our topic.

At the beginning of the Anglo-Boer War Smuts wrote a radical indictment of the British Empire which was published under the title 'A Century of Wrong' (Een Eeuw van Onrecht). It is interesting that Smuts in this book accused the British Empire not because of its strength by which it dominated peoples, but because of its weakness which made it unfit to guarantee peace to the peoples living in the Empire." The dominion that the British Empire exercises over the many tribes and peoples within its jurisdiction rests more on prestige and moral intimidation than upon true military strength!"(10)

In later years Smuts' attitude to the British Empire changed decisively. In a comparison between empires, as they rose and declined in the history of the world, and the British Empire of his own age, this change of attitude and the general direction of Smuts' political thinking is illustrated very clearly. Smuts describes the function which empires formerly fulfilled in the world community. At the same time he indicates the reason why they failed: "In a rudimentary way all such composite empires of the past were leagues of nations, keeping the peace among the constituent nations but unfortunately doing so not on the basis of freedom but of repression. Usually one dominant nation in the group overcame, coerced and kept the rest under. The principle of nationality became overstrained and over-developed and nourished itself by exploiting other weaker nationalities. Nationality overgrown became imperialism, and the empire led a troubled existence on the ruin of the freedom of its constituent nations. That was the evil of the system, but with however much friction and oppression, the peace was usually kept among the nations falling within the empire. These empires have all broken down, and today the British Commonwealth of Nations remains the only embryo league of nations because it is based on the true principles of national freedom and political decentralisation."(11)

The great achievement of the British Empire according to these words of General Smuts was that it became a Commonwealth of Nations which guarantees peace in the relationship between its constituent nations and which at the same time secures freedom within the different individual nations. The British Commonwealth, seen in this light, became for Smuts the pattern for a wider league of nations which was envisaged to comprise the whole world community. In such a global league of nations Smuts saw a new dispensation which could secure peace, justice and freedom in international relationships as well as the inner life of the individual nations.

The League of Nations constituted after the First World War did not fulfil the hopes which Smuts and others had put in it. It could not prevent the outbreak of a Second World War. However, the courage and the vision of General Smuts was not defeated by this event. Before the Allies launched the final offensive against Germany, Smuts held a great speech at the London Guild Hall. He said: "Let the greatest war in human history become the prelude to the greatest peace. To make it such will be the greatest glory of our age and its noblest bequest to the generations to come." (12) At the end of the war Smuts therefore again took a leading part in the establishment of the UNO. He deserves the credit for the fact that the human rights principle was incorporated into the preamble of the UNO Charter.

It was the tragedy of Smut's political career that he himself was not able to apply the human rights concept in his internal policy in his own country. When he returned from the inauguration of the United Nations Organization in the U.S.A. he had to face the political grievances of the Indians against legislation that permanently restricted their right to acquire fixed property in Natal. In United Nations circles Smut's Indian policy was attacked as regressive and contrary to the human rights principle embodied in the UNO Charter. (13)

Today South Africa is accused of violating in *its* racial policy the very principle which its own Prime Minister has introduced into the UNO Charter. The resolution of the SACC calling upon South African Churches to challenge their members to consider conscientious objection can be traced back to the same concept of human rights. The resolution is based on the statement that "South Africa is at present a fundamentally unjust and discriminatory society". (14)

In both, the First and in the Second World War General Smuts was the leading figure in South African politics, backing South Africa's war efforts and enjoying a high reputation among the Allies. In both wars moral reasons were given for South African participation in the conflict. The people of South Africa were conscientized through the mass media that the war was fought against an enemy who intended to destroy the democratic freedoms and who had no respect of the basic principles of justice. Expectations were raised among the black people of South Africa that a victory in the war would lead to the practical implementation of the ideals for which it was fought and that they would receive the political, social and economic rights which were due to them.

In spite of the high moral principles that were pronounced in justification of South African participation in the two World Wars, South Africans at that time were not forced to take part in the fighting.

The Union of South Africa, the new South African state comprising the area of the former Boer republics and the British colonies, took part in the First World War on the side of Great Britain. General Smuts was the leading figure supporting South Africa's participation in the war. He did, however, find considerable opposition among his own people. At the beginning of the First World War a group of several thousand South Africans of Afrikaans origin revolted against participation of the Union in the war. (15) They hoped that Germany might win the war and help them to regain the independence of the Afrikaner Republics. The revolt on the whole, was not supported by the Afrikaans Reformed churches. The synod of one of these churches, namely of the Gereformeerde Kerk, took a decision on the rebellion, which has a bearing on the issue of conscientious objection. The synod accepted the statement of church members who had taken part in the rebellion, that they had obeyed their conscience in accordance with the word of God. It also accepted in good faith the statement to the same effect of church members who had fought against the rebels.(16) In this instance thus, one of the Afrikaans churches passed a resolution which stated that the question as to whether to participate in the First World War or to oppose participation was a moral issue in which some of their members felt bound by conscience to take a personal decision.

8/..... The synod.

The synod accepted that these members in obeying their conscience according to the word of God could arrive at completely opposite decisions.

Even in the Second World War in which again General Smuts was the leading South African figure, the principle of general conscription was not applied. South Africans were not forced to fight a war in which their country was engaged outside its own borders. The individual white South African had to decide whether he was prepared to participate in fighting. The members of the army were given the opportunity to decide on their own whether they were prepared to be sent to the North.

The question as to whether to participate or not to participate in a war in which their nation state was engaged, was not the only moral issue which demanded the attention of white South Africans during the Anglo-Boer War and during the First and Second World War. Among the Afrikaans people and also among the black people in South Africa there was an awareness of the moral obligation incumbent on a government which issued a call to arms. There were Afrikaans leaders and also leaders of the black community who insisted that the authorities who had called to arms, were obliged at the end of the war to implement the ideals for which the war had been fought.

It is worthwhile to remember two striking examples of this awareness at the end of the First World War. At that time a delegation of prominent Afrikaans leaders travelled to Europe to ask for the restoration of the independence of the Afrikaner Republics on the basis of the principle of self-determination of peoples.(17) At the same time a delegation of black leaders travelled to Britain and demanded redress of the grievances of black people in South Africa who had also contributed their share to the war effort of Great Britain. "We have come", they stated, "not to ask for independence, but for an admission into British citizenship as British subjects so that we may also enjoy the free institutions which are the foundations and the pillars of this magnificent Commonwealth."(18)

In our attempt to understand and interpret traditional thinking of South Africans on the issue of war, as it can be discerned since the beginning of the 20th Century in the white and partly also in the black group, we arrive at the following conclusions:



Until the Second World War South African authorities hesitated to introduce military conscription. Wide scope was given to the decision of individuals whether to participate actively in an international war or whether to abstain from participation. This decision was regarded as a moral decision. In some cases individuals claimed the right to decide on their own when to end their participation in war. This decision was also regarded as a moral decision.

There was some realization that a call to arms and the sacrifice of one's life involves the moral obligation on the part of the authorities who issued this call, to implement the ideals for which the war had been fought.

II. Conscientious Objection and non-violent resistance in the discussions of the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation.

The outbreak of the First World War was a setback and disappointment to a number of concerned Christians in different countries who had been untiring in their efforts to ensure and maintain peace between the rival world powers of that time. When the war broke out they were determined that they would not allow their mutual friendship and their cooperation in their peace efforts to be disrupted by the campaigns of hatred. (19) They promised to work for a new world order based on love. Quakers played a leading role in the International Fellowship of Reconciliation which was formed at this time.

The efforts of Quakers ever since the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War to restore peace and to contribute towards reconciliation between the English and the Afrikaner community, paved the way for the Fellowship of Reconciliation to strike roots also in South Africa. Quaker interest in the Afrikaans people had continued after the Anglo-Boer War. The Quakers collected funds for the relief of families who had sustained losses as a result of the war. As a token of their concern for reconciliation in a Christian sense, they took pains to recover family bibles which had been taken from Afrikaans families during the war and to return them to their original owners.

The high esteem in which the British Quakers were held in South Africa, made it easy for them to find interest and support for their efforts to secure peace and to achieve reconciliation after the First World War.

A Quaker mission led by William Henry and Harriet Alexander visited South Africa. They collected money for victims of the First World War, especially for starving children. In doing so, they awakened an understanding in South Africa for the evils of war, and established links with people and groups who shared their anxiousness to ensure world peace. As a result of their visit, a number of individuals in Southern Africa joined the British Fellowship of Reconciliation. Within the next few years a number of peace groups came into existence in South Africa (20)

A South African branch of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation was constituted only after the Second World War. The stimulus again came from Quakers overseas, who visited individuals and groups in South Africa that were concerned about the maintenance of peace. In 1952 Arthur Blaxall, the General Secretary of the Christian Council of South Africa, became General Secretary of the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation.(21)

In defining its' aim and its task the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation took as its starting point the principles laid down in the religious basis of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. This religious basis envisages a world order, based on love. The most important section reads as follows: "That in order to establish a world order based on Love, it is incumbent upon those who believe in this principle to accept it fully, both for themselves and in relation to others, and to take the risks involved in doing so in a world order which does not yet accept it." The main consequences that the International Fellowship of Reconciliation derives from this principle are in the following: "That therefore as Christians we are forbidden to wage war, and that our loyalty to our country, to humanity, to the Church Universal and to Jesus Christ our Lord and Master, calls us instead to a life of service for the enthronement of Love in personal, social, commercial and national life." (22)

The South African Fellowship of Reconciliation did not attract a large membership. In the year 1956 it had approximately 150 members, scattered over a large country. In spite of its small numbers the organization had great influence.

Its members were committed Christians, respected in their churches as well as in the social environment in which they lived. They had contact with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in other countries and were stimulated in their thinking and in their actions by the awareness of having fraternal links with people and groups of the same mind in other countries. In the South African context they were one of the few organisations practicing a fellowship that comprised white and black people working together on an equal footing (23)

An essential feature of the Fellowship was its interdenominational composition. It did not only comprise Quakers, but also members of other denominations who were convinced pacifists. The General Secretary Arthur Blaxall was an Anglican, so was Bishop Alpheus Zulu. The double office of Arthur Blaxall as General Secretary of the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation and as General Secretary of the Christian Council of South Africa, made it easier for the Fellowship to have their concerns communicated to South African church organizations and also to take account of developments and trends in the life of South African churches and mission organizations.

The regulations of the organization made provision for associate membership. This made it possible for people who were not pacifists in the strict sense and for adherents of other faiths than the Christian faith to support the concern of the SAFOR for peace. Thus Chief Albert Luthuli, a prominent leader of the African National Congress and a convinced Christian, who initiated a campaign of non-violent resistance against oppression, was a supporter of the Fellowship. The same applied to Manilal Gandhi, the son of Mahatma Gandhi, who had accepted the task of standing for his father's principles and their application in South Africa. He attended the annual general meetings of the SAFOR, but did not become a member, since, as a Hindu, he was not able to accept the unique character of Christ's love which was one of the tenets of the SAFOR. (24)

If we want to appreciate and evaluate the activities of the SAFOR we have to bear in mind the circumstances under which it worked during the 1950's and at the beginning of the 1960's.

These were the years during which new legislation of intensifying rigidity was introduced in South Africa in order to structure South African society in all its aspects according to the principles of separate development. These were also the years during which black resistance to the new legislation and black aspirations for freedom and for equal participation in the resources of and in the responsibility for South African were growing. During the same years legislation on the military defence of the South African State was tightened so as to make every South African liable to military service.

Chief Albert Luthuli at this time pronounced that love for the fellowman and concern for peace in South Africa demands resistance against the government. The Atlantic Charter in which the Allies had formulated the democratic ideas for which they fought against Nazi Imperialism during the Second World War, led to demands of black political leaders for a re-orientation in the racial policy of South Africa after the war.(25) When these demands were not fulfilled, Luthuli sought for a way in which black people could effectively resist the policy of separate development by methods which did not deny and defeat the cause of love and peace. Chief Luthuli thus spoke of his belief in non-violent resistance as the only non-revolutionary, legitimate and humane way that could be used by people who were denied effective means to further their aspirations.

The principle of non-violent resistance, as interpreted by Chief Luthuli, received support from the General Secretary of the SAFOR, Arthur Blaxall. However other members of the organization disagreed with Blaxall on this point. They were of the opinion that the SAFOR should avoid taking sides in the political struggle. The Fellowship should rather concentrate on converting oppressors. The Pretoria branch of the SAFOR in 1954 raised objections against the statements which Arthur Blaxall had made in connection with the Defiance Campaign, organized by the South African National Congress. The newsletter of the Fellowship reports on this disagreement as follows: "The Pretoria branch of the Fellowship reiterates its feelings of disquiet at the recent policy of the Fellowship in relation to the political situation. The majority of its members feel that by lending support to the political sphere the fellowship defeats its own declared intention of working for reconciliation. They consider that passive resistance was used in the Defiance Campaign as a tactical weapon to further a political aim and for this reason the Campaign is not worthy of our approval."

In their view the primary aim of the Fellowship was to win converts to pacifism. They favoured the personal approach. "The national organization should therefore be directed at the spiritual uplift and strengthening of individual members." (26)

The General Secretary of the Fellowship on the other hand opposed the opinion that the principles of love and peace precluded the members from participating in the political struggle. He was convinced that in the South African situation a Christian concern for reconciliation in human relationships is not possible without involvement in politics and without a preparedness to be involved in conflict with the authorities. He wrote: "As pacifists we are concerned not only with the mechanics of military war, but also with moral issues." "While we must preach pacifism re total war our primary issues should be local injustices." (27)

Rev. Blaxall was alarmed at the injustices perpetrated by the authorities in S.A. For this reason he felt obliged to support non-violent opposition to and protests against the S.A. government. In 1963 three Methodist ministers held a 101 - day fast in protest against the refusal of the Minister of Education to allow a black minister to study in the Divinity Department of the University of Natal. Blaxall on this occasion wrote an article on the value of non-violent protest. "It may be true," he stated "that an implacable government will never be changed by non-parliamentary demonstrations, but let it never be forgotten that it is ultimately the people who matter, not the statesmen!" Blaxall concluded his statement with the following words. "It is not too late to make the last third of the century a period in which violence will be firmly but consistently resisted as the only means left to satisfy a frustrated generation and prove that the sanity of the masses is stronger than the fury of power-drunk men who place all their confidence in machines which perish." (29)

From the documents one has the impression that the members of the SAFOR did not arrive at an agreement on the issue of non-violent resistance. This issue was, however, discussed in a wider context at the conference of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation in Bishofshofen in Austria in 1959. The International Fellowship on this occasion took account of non-violent techniques for ending injustice or resisting aggression that were discussed in different parts of the world.

It decided to launch a research project on violence and non-violence. Already at the conference at Bishofshofen statements revealing new insights on the problem of violence, were formulated. A new definition of violence adopted by the conference reads as follows: "Violence may be defined as the intentional application of force in such a way that it results in physical or psychological harm to those to whom it is applied and/or to destruction of property. The purpose of the action is crucial. Does it, for example, aim at destruction of the opponent or at reconciliation?"

Equally important is the definition of non-violence adopted by the conference: Non-violence is not the mere absence of violence, nor is it non-resistance. Rather it involves non-violent direct action to oppose injustice, aggression, political or economic domination of dependent or subjugated peoples, etc.

It includes such activity as non co-operation, civil disobedience, the strike, boycott, general strike, demonstration, withdrawal of moral or social approval. Sometimes such activity may involve some latent aspect of violence such as a spirit of sullenness or bitterness even though there is no overt physical violence. Or there may be a spirit of goodwill but a sporadic though unintentional outbreak of physical violence. Since there will probably be few perfect illustrations of non-violence in action, such activity nevertheless would fall within the purview of our exploration." (30)

If one compares these views expressed by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation on violence and non-violence with statements worked out by the WCC on the same topic many years later a striking similarity becomes evident. A passage from a document on "Violence, non-violence and the struggle for social justice," issued by the Central Committee of the WCC in August 1973 reads as follows: "We are convinced that far too little attention has been given by the Church and by resistance movements to the methods and techniques of non-violence, in the struggle for a just society. There are vast possibilities for preventing violence and bloodshed and for mitigating violent conflicts already in progress, by the systematic use of forms of struggle which aim at the conversion and not the destruction of the opponent and which use means which do not foreclose the possibility of a positive relationship with him" -

"Non-violent action is highly political. It may be extremely controversial. It is not free of the compromise and ambiguity which accompany an attempt to embody a love-based ethic in a world of power and counter power, and it is not necessarily bloodless." (31)

It appears that the views which had been expressed by the conference of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation at Bishofshofen, did not have a great impact on the discussions in the SAFOR. This became evident when the General Secretary of the Fellowship was involved in a court case. He was found guilty of being in possession of two banned publications and of having aided the activities of banned political organizations, namely the ANC and the PAC for whom he had allegedly handled large sums of money. The SAFOR on this occasion dissociated itself from its General Secretary. Blaxall was forced by the S.A. government to leave the country.

According to the SAFOR the Christian principle of love forbade Christians to participate in war. On this account it pleaded with the South African Government for exemption from military service to be granted to conscientious objectors. The basic principles of the SAFOR, however, did not only oblige its members to oppose warfare and participation in war was a means of solving disputes. It also committed them to a life of service for the enthronement of love in personal social, commercial and national life.

The SAFOR found it difficult to spell out what the enthronement of love implied in practice in South Africa. The General Secretary pointed out that the new laws which were being enacted in terms of the policy of separate development constituted violence. In this situation political neutrality denied the principle of love. Commitment to the enthronement of love demanded involvement in the political power struggle on behalf of the oppressed with the aim to remove unjust structures. These views were opposed by a considerable section of the members of the Fellowship. To them commitment to the principle of love implied that Christians should aim at bringing about change in South Africa by means of the personal approach. They should endeavour to convert the oppressor and thereby to change his attitude. Such conversion, it was believed, would result in a change of unjust structures.

On the level of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation the discussion of the same problem was carried a step further. In agreement with the view of Rev. Blaxall the principle of love was not felt to be in opposition to participation in the political power struggle. The distinction between violent and non-violent action according to the views expressed by this conference was not one of method, but of purpose. An action or a policy could in spite of escalating temporarily into the use of violent methods, be regarded as non-violent as long as it had the welfare of the opponent at heart and as long as it aimed at reconciliation. With this definition of violence and non-violence the traditional concept of violence had been re-interpreted by a pacifist organization many years before the WCC arrived at its decision on violence and non-violence and social justice.

The difficulty to determine the practical implications of the enthronement of love in the harsh realities of the South African situation was one of the main weaknesses of the SAFOR. Towards the end of the 1960's it gradually faded out of existence. Some of its members joined other Christian organizations, such as the Christian Institute. In spite of its small membership the SAFOR has had an impact on South African society. Apart from its concern for racial justice it was one of the first organizations to plead for the protection of conscientious objection and to demand a revision of the relevant sections of the Defence Act.

III. From pacifist to selective conscientious objection.

Already in 1952 the Christian Council of South Africa, the predecessor-body of the later South African Council of Churches, took up the matter of conscientious objection at the request of the Central Committee of the WCC. It endorsed a resolution to the effect that "conscientious objectors have the right to have their opinion respected." (32) In the years to follow the CCSA cooperated closely with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in pleading for the protection of conscientious objectors. In 1957 an amendment to the Defence Act was passed by Parliament which aimed at making all abled bodied South African men liable to military service. In view of this amendment to the Defence Act the Executive Committee of the CCSA resolved that adequate provision should be made "for those who feel compelled by conscience to refuse military service, such provision not to depend on membership of any particular church or association."



The negotiations which the CCSA and its successor organization, the SACC, entered with the government in the 1960's pertained mainly to the request that exemption from military service should not only be granted to adherents of certain religious groups for whom refusal to participate in war was a religious tenet, but to any individual who felt bound by conscience to object against military service.

In the resolution of 1957, referred to above, the theological motivation for this request is indicated. It reflects the theological tradition of the Quakers. The Christian Council submitted this request to the government since it believed "that it is by conscience that God speaks to man in the deepest places of his heart and that this experience of God is essentially an individual and a personal one." (33)

A further feature of the proposals of the CCSA was the request that conscientious objectors be granted exemption not only from military service, but also from military training. In addition it was asked that a decision whether to recognize a person as a conscientious objector or whether to refuse recognition, should not be taken by military officials, but a civilian tribunal. The type of conscientious objection to which the recognition should be accorded was not specified. It is to be assumed that at this stage the supporters of the resolutions of the Council thought of conscientious objection in the pacifist sense, i.e. the refusal to participate in war in every case, irrespective of the situation and of the consequences.

In the years to follow the emphasis in the understanding of conscientious objection changed. The new approach may be partly attributed to the work which had been done at the conference of the WCC. Already at the Mindolo Conference in 1963, South African society had been considered as a society which had institutionalized violence in its structures. The struggle of liberation movements in Southern Africa was therefore regarded as a reaction to violence. In the years to follow the problem of violence received further attention at the conference on Church and Society in 1966 in Geneva. At the conference of the plenary assembly of the WCC at Uppsala in 1969 violence was defined as "destructive imposition of power."

These insights did not remain unnoticed in South Africa by Christians who were alarmed about the growing hostility between the white and the black groups. They applied this concept of violence not only in examining the South African political situation, but also in examining principles on which the Republic of South Africa based its defence. There are indications that the thinking of a number of South Africans on the problem of war during these years was stimulated also by controversies on this topic in Western Germany, especially during the years when military service was re-introduced, and also at the time when atomic weapons are released for use in the defence system of this country. The objections which had been raised against military defence in the course of these controversies were not pacifist in the strict sense. War was not rejected from the outset as a matter of principle, but rather for practical reasons. Under modern conditions any war, it was said, even if it was in the beginning of a restrictive nature, could easily escalate into global warfare. It entailed the danger of the destruction of a large part of the human community. Many people were convinced that under such circumstances war may no longer be used as a method of settling international differences.

The experiences of the United States during the Vietnam War were a further factor which stimulated thought on the problems of war in South Africa. In the USA these experiences had led certain groups, especially young people, to realize that the alleged protection of Western orientated countries against the threat of Communism, was not a sufficient justification for the war. The involvement of the United States in the war served to maintain a corrupt political and economic system in South Vietnam. Moreover the course of the war showed that the United States in spite of being a world power and in spite of its sophisticated weapons, was rather helpless in fighting against an enemy who used the methods of guerilla warfare and who enjoyed the support of a considerable section of the local population.

In May 1969 the South African Minister of Defence held an important speech in Parliament on the work and the underlying policy of the South African Defence Force. The South African economist Francis Wilson responded to the speech by an article in the magazine S.A. Outlook. This article is an impressive evidence of a new approach in the evaluation of military service in South Africa.

It is the concern of the article to show that military service in South Africa has to be understood in the context of the characteristic features of the society which it is meant to defend.(35)

According to Francis Wilson South African Defence Policy is based on a fallacy. It is the fallacy that South Africa's safety ultimately lies in its arms. This view he refutes by the following statement: "The security of the state in this part of the world depends primarily upon the creation of a just society where each man respects his neighbour." (36)

In the context of this article service in the South African Defence Force is a moral issue which the young South African has to face and on which he has to arrive at a decision. It is important to note that military service in South Africa is not only seen as a moral issue for those Christians who in principle reject all participation in war like the Quakers. It is also not seen as a moral issue only for those who reject participation in any war because of the danger which the use of modern weapons and the rising costs of military defence entail. For the young South African the issue is more intense and immediate. He has to realise that military service can imply cooperation in a security system which is meant to protect a basically unjust society.

The ideas which Francis Wilson and other South Africans had expressed on military service found further consideration at a conference on conscientious objection which the Civil Rights League organized in Cape Town in 1970. Several church organizations and secular organizations sent delegates to the conference. Francis Wilson was one of the main speakers.

In his lecture Francis Wilson spoke extensively about violence which is institutionalised in the life of a society. He said: "Violence, if you take the definition developed by churches in recent years, is the destructive imposition of power. This means, where power is being imposed in such a way that it is destructive, for example, the ordering of society in South America, where you have a few very, very rich people owning all the land and masses of very, very poor people, But it need not necessarily be like that. You could have a fair distribution of wealth. But is it not a destructive imposition of power if a vast number of people are dying as a result of poverty.?"

If this is a form of violence, and the other one is a form of violence, which one is one going to choose? Is one going to decide to maintain the order at all costs and so participate in military service? Or is one going to decide that the whole set-up is so unjust and that all means of changing it or discussing it, have been ruled out, so that one will participate in the violence of the other side because one believes that this is a lesser form of violence than the existing violence in the situation. Or is one going to say that there is perhaps a third way out, that neither the violence of the existing regime nor the violence of those who are trying to change it is right. And one is going to try and operate in a creative non-violent way to eliminate the violence within the society."(37)

In this way Francis Wilson tries to create an understanding for the ethical problems which young people face when they are called up for military service. He pointed out that it is possible for young people to arrive at different decisions on this ethical problem and insisted that they must have the freedom to take a decision for which they personally can bear the responsibility. Francis Wilson himself in his lecture showed a preference for what he called the third way "which regards neither violence nor counter-violence as right and which tries to operate in a positive way to eliminate both." He therefore suggested to seek this third way and to change over from war thinking to peace thinking.

This lecture of Francis Wilson had a great influence on the conference. It did not confine itself to considering the need of having conscientious objectors exempted from military service and military training. The conference was aware of the value of a type of national service which did not involve military training and the carrying of arms but aimed at giving young people an opportunity to contribute in a positive way towards peace. The conference therefore called upon the government to encourage an intensive research to formulate peaceful and constructive forms of national service to be undertaken by the youths of all racial groups and public and private experimentation with pilot programmes. Religious and educational leaders were asked to take the initiative in developing pilot programmes. (38)

In the light of this demand negotiations for the recognition of conscientious objection no longer aimed merely at the exemption from military service. They aimed at obtaining the right for South Africans who were convinced that military methods cannot ensure peace and justice to the South African people, a possibility to contribute towards peace in a different type of national service.

IV. Conscientious objection as a lever for a general rejection of the South African system.

The congress of the AACC at Lusaka in 1974 had the effect of initiating a new phase in the approach to the problems of conscientious objection in South Africa. At this conference several participants of the SACC encountered representatives of the liberation movements. Having returned to South Africa, the General Secretary of the SACC reported to the National Conference on this encounter. The representatives of the liberation movements had made a deep impression on him and on other participants from South Africa. In these movements, there were many convinced Christians. A Methodist preachers' association had been formed in one area to serve the Methodist freedom fighters. Practising Christians in liberation movements were not aware of a contradiction between the violent methods they used in the fight against South Africa and their Christian faith. They had taken their decision to join the liberation movements in the full awareness of being Christians and of being responsible to God for their actions.

At the conference there was an open discussion on the changes which the freedom fighters expected if a violent conflict with South Africa and in South African society is to be avoided. They expected influx control, job reservation and migratory labour to be abolished. They also mentioned other expectations.

The report on the ALL Africa Conference of Churches made a deep impression on the participants of the SACC National Conference. Among these participants there were several whose sons had left the country and joined the liberation movements. The conference under these circumstances had good reason to consider carefully how the SACC could respond to the expectations of the liberation movements. Several participants were of the opinion that the churches in South Africa have no possibility of effecting the changes, which the representatives of the liberation movements had demanded.

They therefore proposed that the churches should envisage changes in matters in which they have a realistic possibility of action. One of these possibilities was the encouragement of conscientious objection in the churches. South African Christians could be encouraged to consider refusal to do military service in view of the injustice and violence inherent in the structures of South African society. This consideration induced Dr. Beyers Naudé and Rev. Douglas Bax to submit a motion for a resolution on conscientious objection.

The resolution of the SACC on conscientious objection has thus to be understood as a response to the expectations of the liberation movements. It is not in the first instance concerned about justice to be done by the government to conscientious objectors, but rather encourages South Africans to consider whether they should, in view of the injustice institutionalised in South African society, choose the path of conscientious objection. In this respect the resolution differs essentially from previous efforts of the SACC and other organisations with regard to the recognition of conscientious objection by the authorities. The resolution is meant to make the members of the SACC aware of the confrontation between South African churches and the state. It is meant to enhance the credibility of their concern for justice in the eyes of the liberation movements.

The theological arguments in the resolution of the SACC have to be understood against the background of the encounter with the liberation movements. They are drawn from the two different theological traditions in the evaluation of war by Christians. The concept of the holy war, which is one of the two traditions, assumes that Christians are obliged to participate in war at any cost and at any price, if the war is being waged on behalf of the cause of God. The concept of the holy war was the theological justification for the crusades in the Middle ages. The same concept is used today openly or implicitly by the South African authorities or by churchmen supporting the South African political system, to justify the loss of human lives, the enormous military expenses, and the involvement of South Africa in war and beyond its borders. South Africa is considered to have a divine commission to defend the Christian values in the south of the continent against the onslaught of Communism.

The second theological tradition pertains to the so-called just war theory. This theory prevailed at the time of the Reformation. It assumes that war is evil. War may be inevitable in some cases, but ethical rules are necessary as guidelines in which cases war may be justifiable. One of its presuppositions is the distinction between offensive and defensive war. Only the latter is considered to be justifiable. Another rule pertains to the aim of the war. It may not aim at the destruction of the opponent. A further consideration concerns the expected effect of the war. The effect of the war must be better than the evil it produces.

The resolution does not render direct support to the holy war theory or to the concept of a just war. It does, however, intimate, that a South African Christian, thinking in terms of the holy war theory or of the just war theory is bound by these presuppositions to consider whether he can with a good conscience participate in a war which defends the present structures of South African society.

V. Summary of historical review.

We have now reached a stage at which we are in a position to consider the findings of our historical review:

Ever since the Anglo-Boer War, a small group of Quakers contributed towards keeping alive in South African society a concern for justice, for the protection of human rights, for reconciliation between hostile groups and for peace in international relationships. After the Anglo-Boer War they undertook efforts for the reconciliation between the English and the Afrikaans community. After the First World War they tried to obtain support in South Africa for alleviating the suffering of war victims in Europe. At the same time they awakened concern for securing peace in the world. After the Second World War they drew attention to the injustice to which black South Africans are exposed and to their suffering. Their commitment to pacifism motivated them to plead for the protection of the conscientious objector.

General Smuts had close Quaker friends, especially in Great Britain. With them he shared a deep concern for securing world peace.

He was influenced by their thoughts. He differed, however, from them in his approach and did not share their pacifism. Smuts did not reject war outrightly. He intended to secure world peace by creating an international order and an international authority which was to be superior to the individual nation states. In his practical suggestion for a league of nations Smuts wrote in 1918: "If the future of the peace of the world is to be maintained, it will not be sufficient merely to erect an institution for the purpose of settling international disputes after they have arisen; it will be necessary to devise an instrument of government which will deal with the causes and sources of disputes."(39)

Smuts realized the interdependence of world peace in international relationships and peace, justice and freedom within a nation state. This insight motivated him at the end of the Second World War to have the concept of 'fundamental human rights' incorporated into the preamble of the UNO Charter. It was a concept by which to test the legitimacy of the legislation of the individual nation state by an internationally accepted criterion. General Smuts failed to implement the human rights principle in the policy of his own party and to spell out its implications for the relationships between whites and blacks in South Africa. As a result the concept of fundamental human rights, formulated by General Smuts, in the words of his biographer W.K. Hancock 'from that time onwards' ... 'became a stick with which to beat South Africa' (40)

Until the Second World War black South Africans were enlisted on a voluntary basis for participation in international wars in which the South African state was involved. The contribution of black South African volunteers to the war efforts raised the expectations and stimulated the demands among black South Africans, that the democratic freedoms and the concept of justice which the Allies claimed to protect, would be applied at the end of the respective war to their own group in their own country. The contribution to the war efforts on the part of black volunteers was thus considered to be a contribution towards justice in their own country.



In the white group considerable scope was granted to individuals to decide on their own whether they were prepared to contribute towards the war efforts of their country. General Smuts, in spite of his commitment to the war efforts of the Allies in the two World Wars, was an outspoken opponent of military conscription. At the end of the First World War he wrote: "I look upon conscription as the taproot of nationalism; unless that is cut, all our labours will eventually be in vain." (41)

Conscientious objection received intensive attention only after the Second World War when legislation on military conscription was tightened. The South African Fellowship of Reconciliation was one of the first organizations to plead for the protection of the conscientious objector. It was strongly influenced by the Quaker tradition.

The South African Fellowship of Reconciliation in its concern for peace had strong reservations against the policy of separate development. At the same time it pleaded for the protection of the conscientious objector. In spite of its rejection of the policy of separate development, the Fellowship did not base its plea for the protection of conscientious objectors on its reservations against this policy. Its demand for the protection of conscientious objectors emerged from its general condemnation of war.

In general the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation regarded the conversion of the individual as the most important presupposition for a change in the oppressive political system of South Africa. The majority of its members appear to have had a negative understanding of power. They did not place a high value on the change in power structures and on participation in the political power struggle. The tensions within the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation between those who expected decisive changes from the conversion of individuals and those who insisted on a change in power structures, reflect tensions which are at force at present between members of the different South African Churches. A considerable number of members of the Fellowship tended to regard the concepts of power and love as contradictory and mutually exclusive.

In the International Fellowship of Reconciliation a more positive understanding of the concept of power and of its distinction from violence became stronger towards the end of the 1950ies. The new insights did not however, have a great impact on the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation. The International Fellowship of Reconciliation arrived at insights on power and on its relationship to violence, which resembled those formulated at the conference of the WCC during the second half of the 1960ies.

With the South African Fellowship of Reconciliation the SACC shared the concern for the protection of the conscientious objector. In the initial stage the SACC pleaded for a recognition of conscientious objection on the ground of the protection which was to be accorded to the conscience of the individual. At a later stage the plea of the SACC for the protection of the conscientious objector was combined with a request for an alternative type of national service, that serves the promotion of peace.

The SACC resolution on conscientious objection of the year 1974 was motivated not so much by the concern for the conscientious objector, but rather by the desire to reject the policy of separate development and to give the concern of South African churches for peaceful changes in South African society a greater credibility in the eyes of liberation movements. The resolution challenges S.A. Christians to strive for greater clarity on the concepts of love, power and of violence and on their mutual relationship.

In the decade between the beginning of the 1960ies and the beginning of the 1970ies we thus discern a shift of emphasis in the demands for the official recognition of conscientious objection. New insights emerged during these years on violence and non-violence from an evaluation of events in different countries (Sharpeville in South Africa, the Civil Rights struggle in USA, the Students Revolts in different countries, the Vietnam War etc). According to these insights violence does not prevail merely if weapons are used as a means of solving a conflict. Violence can also be entrenched in the laws and in the constitution of a country, if these deny basic human rights to their citizens. In terms of this thinking a violent revolt against a basically unjust political system must not be considered as violence, but as reaction to violence or as counter-violence.

In the context of these views, institutional or structural violence, as perpetrated by groups which are in control of the political system, is morally not preferable to counter-violence. In the internal conflicts within a country there is rather a tendency to attribute the main responsibility for violent conflicts, to the authorities which provoke violent actions by denying justice and freedom to a section of the people.

During these years a number of people in South Africa also drew attention to the close connection between the domestic policy and international relationships. New insights gained force: Strife and dissatisfaction within a country as a result of oppressive legislation has an effect on international relationships and provokes hostility from outside. On the other hand, a government relying for the maintenance of its authority on oppressive laws and dictatorial power, is in need of an outside enemy in order to be able to justify its actions. It maintains that the security and protection of the country against the outside enemy demands such exceptional laws and measures within the country.

A comparison between the findings of the Bishofshofen Conference of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation of 1959, the statement of the WCC on violence, non-violence and the struggle for social justice, and the SACC resolution on conscientious objection reveals striking similarities in the understanding and evaluation of violence and non-violence. No longer is violent action outrightly condemned in every case. Neither is non-violence understood as the mere absence of violent actions. Violence and non-violence are distinguished according to the purpose which is pursued and according to the attitude towards the opponent. These new insights may not be attributed to a greater preparedness of the respective organizations to accept violent action as a legitimate way of bringing about change, but to a growing awareness of the limited options which a right system of institutionalized violence leaves to oppressed groups for changing their situation and implementing a better order. This very awareness led to the intensified demand that the possibilities and methods of non-violent action which still were open and applicable should be explored and made use of.

Under these circumstances the understanding of conscientious objection was bound to change. On the whole refusal to do military service or to follow a call to arms was no longer considered to be the only issue.

The question was asked: How can a South African in a situation of escalating violence and counter-violence contribute towards peace. The demand for an alternative form of service to military service in the negotiations of the SACC at the beginning of the 1970ies placed the negotiations about the recognition of conscientious objection on a new level.

In spite of several weak aspects, the SACC resolution on conscientious objection deserves credit as a protest against the violence entrenched in the South African political, economic and social system. It has drawn the attention of Christians to the personal decision that is necessary on their part in a situation of escalating violence. The resolution has at least had the effect of causing many South Africans to think on problems of war and violence, even if they are not prepared to support the resolution. At the same time the resolution presents a challenge to South African churches. They face the task to act responsibly and to offer pastoral care and advice to their members in a situation in which preservation of the present order implies participation in violence and injustice and in which efforts to change the present system by non-violent methods have hitherto not had a decisive effect.

#### VI. Evaluation.

The SACC resolution on conscientious objection attributes a high responsibility to people who are called up for military service or who are in the Defence Force. As a rule they are still young. One has to consider that a decision is expected mainly from young people who have just come forward from state controlled schools which promote an ideology supportive to the aims of the state. Churches are therefore required by the SACC resolution to consider how they prepare young people for such a decision. In this connection it is necessary to examine what is taught and said in the regular proclamation of the gospel and in religious instruction on human dignity in South African society, on the value of human life, on the obligation of the Christian to contribute towards peace and justice in the international community, on the exploitation inherent in the South African economic system, on the life style of white South Africans etc.

It is important also to investigate very closely how certain central biblical texts are interpreted in the parishes, e.g. The Sermon on the Mount, the Fifth or the Sixth Commandment protecting human life, the text Roman 13 1:7 on the attitude of the Christian towards political authorities, etc.

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