

# NON-VIOLENCE AND THE CHALLENGE TO APARTHEID

A Review of:

Mokgethi Motlhabi, **Challenge to Apartheid: Towards A Moral National Resistance**. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988.

The recent restrictions placed on a number of democratic organizations have once again placed the role of non-violence as an effective instrument against the Apartheid state under the spotlight. The applicability and effectiveness of various non-violent strategies need to be soberly evaluated in the light of the state's consistently brutal response to democratic challenge. Although written some time before the recent bout of restrictions/bannings, Mokgethi Motlhabi's **Challenge to Apartheid** an updated version of **The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance To Apartheid: A Social - Ethical Analysis** (Skotaville 1984), provides an interesting approach to this question. In essence the book is an examination of the interconnection between moral-ethical analysis, and the theory and practice of the 'national resistance movements in South Africa'. It aims "to determine the moral significance of this challenge and its implications for future resistance" (p1), the intention being twofold: Firstly, "to justify the struggle itself, and the methods adopted in carrying it out"; and secondly, "to inform action through the adoption of appropriate strategies based on morally sound analysis and guidelines." (p4)

For Motlhabi morality is "not to be viewed simply as a matter of purposeless "dos" and "don'ts" but rather as a means of informing action through prior analysis and judgement of the situation before the actual decision is taken." (p5) His 'frame of reference' is an adaptation of the moral laws developed by Walter G. Muelder in **Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics**, which, it is argued, are not specific to Christianity, but have, or are hoped to have, 'equal moral significance' to Christian and non-Christian alike. These laws are seen to be universal, but not in violation of any cultural and situational relativity.

Is, however, a moral-ethical approach a good way in which to begin a study of this kind? Lenin (1977b:p301), argued that the only principle upon which the tactics of the Bolshevik Party should rest was that of expediency, while Marx and Engels were of the opinion that part of the reason for the failure of the Paris Commune (March 1830) was the initial reluctance of the revolutionary movement to employ sufficient force at the appropriate time. This is not to suggest that Marxism-Leninism views anything other than an armed struggle as totally inapplicable to a revolutionary struggle. Instead Lenin argues that the state owes its existence to its monopoly of naked terror (Lenin: 1977a), and the task of the revolutionary is to both neutralize and combat this terror. Both tasks require a realistic assessment of the relative strength of the state,

as well as the options, or possible combination of options, available to the revolutionary movement in question. Motlhabi, on the other hand, seems to oscillate between a desire to choose strategies in isolation of his ethical norms and values, and frustration at the realization that such principles may be futile in the face of reality.

Motlhabi examines five different options for social change in South Africa: guerrilla warfare, foreign intervention, sanctions, direct Christian action, and intensified noncooperation with the Government. I shall briefly discuss the fourth and fifth options, as they are most central to the discussion of non-violent resistance.

## THE CHURCH

Motlhabi argues that direct Christian action, defined as 'action by the churches and by Christian groups,' stands at the other extreme to guerrilla action. Here, as elsewhere, the discussion centres around a characterization of 'Black Theology', a phenomenon whose primary function is held to be conscientization at the grass-roots.

Motlhabi discusses several ways in which the church can participate in the struggle. Along with the central call for 'conscientization through the pulpit', he advocates a form of 'Billy Graham-type evangelizing' - which refers primarily to well planned 'crusades', for example, protest marches, which, he insists, are to occur throughout the country, in both townships and cities, leading up to some form of declaration. Motlhabi writes the "It would be interesting to find out how the government would react if all the participants were advised to carry their Bibles and, in case of police interference, raise them high in silence or in combined prayer. Such protable sanctuaries, if violated, would explode the Christian pretensions of the South African government leaders and, if they approve of its action, those who support it". (p201)

The discussion is however marked by a characteristic lack of attention to the role of class in the conscientization process, either by way of the nature of oppression, or by way of a theory of what constitutes a revolutionary, or socially rebellious class. In addition Motlhabi displays an uneasiness in crossing from the situation specific (the role of 'black theology' in South Africa) to a general discussion of the role of the church as an agent of social change. In turn he fails to explain adequately the role of the white churches in the struggle. In various places rather cursory references are made concerning the role of

some white "radicals" who are prepared to commit themselves actively to the 'struggle for national liberation', but he seems to lack any faith in the role of whites as a group. With regard to the white churches he merely rounds off his discussion of 'black theology' by arguing that, "The rest of the church in South Africa is, therefore, called to this type of grass roots re-evangelizing" (p200) This attitude is disturbingly close to PW Botha's celebrated reference to 'Afrikaners and other Whites'.

Motlhabi is writing with little reference to the heroic struggles of the working class and national liberation movements in South Africa, and, as importantly, with little or no reference to, other than a cursory recognition of, the harsh ability of the state to respond to such initiatives. References are made to only three historical occasions in which such a strategy was carried out. It would seem that Motlhabi has himself fallen foul of his own definition of strategy, i.e. the need for 'evaluation and review of previous successes and failures' (see pg 177-178). In addition, Motlhabi fails to contextualize adequately the particular movement or strategy he is discussing, and the relationship between these and other movements or strategies adopted by other organizations. By doing this, for example, by discussing the potential affects of a combination of armed struggle, Christian/moral noncooperation, and trade union action, the book could have been considerably enriched.

Another approach is the recommendation that the grass-roots approach to evangelization be taken up by ecumenical organizations like the Interdenominational African Ministers Association of South Africa (IDAMSA) and 'their white counterparts' (p201). Here Motlhabi simply argues that "A proliferation of these groups with a common purpose in both black and white churches all over the country would create not only awareness but also concern about the country's injustice, mutual trust, and the overcoming of past suspicions, as well as the desire to unite against racial oppression and hatred" (p201).

Given South Africa's abysmal human rights record, can we really expect such approaches to arouse a common concern for the welfare of all South Africa's citizens? Instead we are witnessing a structured intolerance, not some type of misconception that can be corrected by these forms of 'counter propaganda'. Indeed experience suggests that such types of 'counter propaganda' are easily met with violence by the state. As Bishop Tutu is fond of quoting, in Gandhi's India, and Martin Luther King's America, one could appeal to a basic set of common values and conceptions of 'humanity'. In South Africa these shared values do not exist, and for this reason passive campaigns of this sort are unlikely to succeed.

The Kairos theologians have tended to be more pessimistic about the value of such pressure on the state and have argued that "A tyrannical regime cannot continue to rule for very long without becoming more and more violent. As the majority of the people begin to demand their rights and put pressure on the tyrant, so will the tyrant resort more and more to desperate, cruel, gross and ruthless forms of tyranny and repression" (p23). This is not to negate their commitment to the 'struggle through

the pulpit', but rather to express a more sober estimation of the state's response to their efforts. Motlhabi's failure is not his attempt to outline certain ways in which the church can involve itself in social movements, but his failure to integrate adequately the churches' role into broader social dynamics of oppression and challenge. Here he could well have examined the Kairos document, and the work of progressive church leaders, who have sought to identify common ground with a variety of groupings, including the external movements engaged in armed struggle.

## PROTESTING

The second non-violent possibility facing resistance movements outlined by Motlhabi is that of 'active non-cooperation', which is described as a secular counterpart to direct Christian action. Motlhabi sees groups embarking on such protests as finding their "base in black consciousness and white consciousness groups" while making it clear that the role of non-racialism in the 'struggle' is by no means crucial.

Relying heavily on the work of Gene Sharp, Motlhabi discusses three options; conversion, accommodation and coercion. Again his simple dichotomous viewpoint obscures what could otherwise have been a valuable discussion. He writes that "Whites who sincerely want change in South Africa will naturally depend on converting their own communities. Blacks can no longer rely on this method alone, but must resort to some form of coercion. . . . The question facing blacks is, What form of coercion will be used?" (p203).

At this point Motlhabi seems to have accepted that, realistically speaking, a violent confrontation is inevitable. Rather reluctantly however, he refers to a number of possible acts of noncooperation that would either minimize, or hopefully remove the need for, armed conflict. Taken from Sharp these are discussed in three groups. Firstly, "pilgrimages, marches, picketing, vigils, haunting officials, public meetings, issuing and distributing protest literature, renouncing honors, protesting emigration, and humorous pranks." Secondly, social noncooperation (social boycotts), economic boycotts (consumers boycotts, traders' boycotts, rent refusal and international trade embargo), strikes and political noncooperation (eg. boycott of government employment, boycott of elections, administrative noncooperation, civil disobedience and mutiny). The third includes sit-ins, fasts, reverse strikes, nonviolent obstructions, nonviolent invasion, and parallel government. However the question remains as to whether this last hope style politics is relevant. Like the Paris Commune, is Motlhabi's democratic movement destined to fail because of its reluctance to adapt to a rapidly changing political climate?

Motlhabi points to the failure of Sharp to take adequate account of the problem of "organizing and mobilizing the people for resistance if their leadership is removed and restricted by the government" (p205). Although there is a sense in which Motlhabi's uneasiness with Sharp's formulation goes beyond the problem of leadership, he fails to express adequately his viewpoint on the prospects for these nonviolent strategies. This failure becomes especially acute when he implies that it is possible to get

enough (black) people to stop obeying and cooperating with the state. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to begin by telling us which blacks stand to gain from non-cooperation. Whether Motlhabi likes it or not black South Africa is a very real and intense and very real class divisions. Some blacks have a very real interest in maintaining certain types of state forms, if not the Apartheid system itself. Wolpe argues that, at present, common objectives in the policies of corporate capital and in sections of the black petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie can be found which have changed their relations with one another from traditional "opposition and hostility" to "convergence and cooperation" (p75/76).

It is particularly disturbing that Motlhabi fails to discuss the effects of noncooperation, and other nonviolent strategies, on the state. The rent boycott is a good example of a nonviolent strategy which has not only been sustained for several years, in the face of harsh state responses, but has elicited major changes in the state's approach to conflict management. Naked force is being coupled with upgrading schemes and intensive propaganda efforts by the state to redefine the barriers of conflict. Surely when such a sensitive nerve has been touched it should receive far more than a few cursory remarks? It is unfortunate that a discussion of the trade union movement, potentially the most powerful and effective nonviolent grouping to date, is only incorporated in the closing pages of the book (pp.210/211). One would have imagined that the use of Wiehahn legislation by the trade unions for their own benefit would have been the subject of a major part of the discussion around non-violent resistance.

A second criticism relates directly to Motlhabi's earlier discussion of strategy, and in particular his statement that "the mere possession of a strategy must not be regarded as the solution to the problem". At no stage do we encounter an in-depth debate as to the merits of the various noncooperation strategies mentioned. The boycott strategy is a case that should never be simply accepted, but one which should be carefully contextualized and frequently re-examined, not only with respect to the boycott of elections, but to the homeland system (the latter being dismissed *in toto* by Motlhabi). It is a mistake to treat anything as an absolute 'untouchable', even an apartheid-created body. Miedzinsky, for example, has conducted a study of traditional, elected and alternative structures in a self-governing 'homeland' and has argued that the position of bantustan officials is ambiguous, making it possible for an MP in the bantustans to use his or her position for the benefit of the community.

Strategies based on participation in 'apartheid bodies' are not necessarily correct, but deserve careful examination. The aims, and chances of success, need to be soberly evaluated. Only then can we decide on their applicability. Motlhabi tends to do exactly the opposite. He assumes

that because a structure is immoral one should not consider participation within it. However such an approach is by no means peculiar to Motlhabi. Archbishop Tutu, Beyers Naude and other clergymen used similar arguments to dismiss participation in the October 25 municipal elections as a strategy for social change. Such an approach is as misguided as it is incorrect. In this regard Lenin was correct to argue that the Bolshevik decision not to participate in the Russian Duma in 1905 "proved correct at the time, not because non-participation in reactionary parliaments is correct in general, but because we accurately appraised the objective situation, which was leading to the rapid development of the mass strikes" (1977c p3031).

Unless the revolutionary movement can continually maintain a spirit of flexibility and preparedness to seize tactical advantages in all available spaces, even those areas which have a tradition of being rejected outright, it stands little chance of overthrowing the South African State. As Lenin said: "to reject compromises 'on principle', to reject the permissibility of compromises in general, no matter of what kind, is childishness, which it is difficult even to consider seriously" (1977b p304).

Motlhabi's use of a moral-ethical analysis reveals little more than his view of the self constitutive subjects under discussion. This does not mean that we should ignore passive resistance *per se*; on the contrary we should look for materialist reasons underlying the lack of significant overlapping areas of shared values and concern for the welfare of all classes and race groups in South Africa. This can best be done by way of an intensive study of, not only the strengths and weaknesses of various nonviolent campaigns, but also – more importantly – their impact on specific classes, and broader social movements. This will allow the movements to search for weak spots in state strategy, something which should never be considered impossible, rather than offer themselves as cannon fodder to some well meaning, but unrealistic, show of martyrdom. □

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