

# Violence and the Gospel in South Africa

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The first thing that has to be said is that we are not just talking about a single country a long way off. What is sobering and startling in South Africa is the realization that it is a sort of caricature of the whole of our world— 'like everywhere else, only more so'. The world in focus, perhaps: because here you see the proximity of lavish over-consumption and starvation, freedom and slavery, massive military investment and plain human need. Here you can see the link between *our* wealth and *their* poverty. A few of the intermediate stages that usually cushion us from this realization are missing, so that poverty appears in its naked causal connection with the aggressive greed of a minority. It is impossible there not to see poverty as what is created by the violence of the few against the many in a situation of a great natural wealth of resources. In some of the so-called native 'homelands' in South Africa, where populations are forcibly shifted from their existing locations, something between one-fifth and one-third of black children die before they are five years old. They do not die by accident, though they die of 'natural' causes: they die because decisions have been taken which mean that they are exposed to disease and malnutrition endemic in these areas, far from real medical care. They die because of Dr. Piet Koornhof, the astonishingly titled Minister for Co-operation and Development. That will sound shocking; though the real shock is to grasp that children there and elsewhere in Africa or in Asia or Central America also die because of us, because of the electors of our governments. South Africa is too often seen as an isolated horror; but all that it really is is the world we know stripped of some of its self-deceptions, with the mechanisms of inhuman greed a bit nearer the surface.

So that's a preliminary caution against facile disgust at South Africa. It *should* help us to see the connection of poverty with violence everywhere, the violence which is constituted by our clinging to and fantastically misusing the common wealth of humanity. And I'm not fashionably redefining 'violence'. If St Thomas Aquinas was right to see violence in any act whereby I diminish the liberty of another, then poverty which exists in the face of disproportionate wealth, in the face

of the possibility of sharing, exists because of 'violence', because of decisions made by the wealthy. And this seems worth saying at the beginning of 'One World Week'.

In South Africa, then, we see the reality of wealth created and preserved by violence: by a legal system and a political practice that sustains poverty and therefore death. This is how it is in the homelands, and, even more dreadfully, in the 'resettlement' areas, the supposedly temporary camps for communities in transit (they can last for five years or more); this is how it is in the townships. Soweto has almost the population of Wales, and is served by one general hospital; there is, on average, one doctor for every 40,000 blacks (and one doctor for every 400 whites). This is something that cannot honestly be seen as anything but violence. And this is why Desmond Tutu could say in an interview earlier this year that violence is not (from the black perspective) 'something that is going to be brought into the South African situation, which is conflictless', something new, from outside: '(the) primary violence in South Africa is the violence of apartheid'. The law of the land and its present execution add up to a systematic aggression against seven out of ten inhabitants of the Republic, those seven who have no redress, no power to change their situation, no *vote*.

That is where violence begins; and that is the situation which the Christian Church in South Africa faces. The Church, there as elsewhere, preaches a gospel, (and enacts it in the sacraments) which affirms that God accepts and welcomes the unacceptable, those not at peace with themselves, those on the edge of the worlds of morality and society, those without power; and He calls them into His Kingdom, into new forms of living and praying together which enshrine their value and freedom— forms of living that are the beginning of a restoration of all creation, so that it can again reflect God's goodness. This is the rationale of the Church; and however little the Church likes it or is even aware of it, its very existence in witness to the Kingdom implies a *judgement*. If the liberating word of God in Jesus is uttered in a society *built upon* the 'unacceptability' of the mass of its citizens, the implication is clear. God is not on the side of this society, God judges it, it is in open rebellion against His will. When the very nature and identity of such a society rests on the denial of fundamental liberty, health, the means of sustaining life, to the greater part of its people, then, however hard you try to preach a 'non-political' gospel, it should be impossible not to see the contradiction between this society and the humanity God creates in His Kingdom.

This is, I take it, the meaning of God's 'option for the poor', as discussed in some Third World theologies. Mention of this theme is, to some people, deeply disturbing. Twice in our visit to South Africa, when we had said something about God and the poor, God and the

victims of violence, we were asked, 'But who *are* the poor here?' The idea that God was on the side of the oppressed (in the simple and obvious sense of the word) was offensive: are not the rich spiritually poor? don't some people deserve the wealth they've worked for? aren't we all oppressed in one way or another? how can God, who loves all, love the poor more than the rich? and so on. So it may be worth saying that I don't think any of these questions grasps the heart of the idea. God's 'option for the poor' doesn't mean that He likes the poor and dislikes the rich, or that He thinks (and we should think) the poor are morally superior and that all rich people are automatically wicked, or that the rich have no problems. It *does* mean that in a setting where some people (even unconsciously) assume the right to determine the fate of others, to decide what their possibilities shall be, God, by promising His Kingdom in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, judges and condemns that system, and the change that He wills for it is bound to be a change in favour of those deprived of power or liberty. The basic problem of the wealthy person is how to be reconciled with God's will when that will works against their status as wealthy or powerful—and that is a tough and complex problem (which all of us in Britain, relative to much of the rest of the world, are involved in), which is not based on a simple moralizing judgement on rich individuals.

That's by the way, but it may be a useful clarification. But now, granted that the gospel can only, by its very presence, declare God's judgment on a society like South Africa, *what action follows?* Some would still answer that the Church can do no more than continue to proclaim God's grace, attempting to touch individuals on both sides of the divide, waiting for the full implications of the Kingdom to make their impact. This is a point of view frequently heard in the extensive and very influential charismatic circles in the South African churches, some of which are engaged in energetic and imaginative primary evangelism in the townships. The goal of such work is individual commitment and discipline, integration into a vigorous 'renewed' Christian group. It assumes that responsibility for the wider society—the responsibility of a new black Christian to his immediate setting in the black community—is discharged by personal holiness, by dedicated prayer and continuing evangelistic effort, not by explicit condemnation of the social structure or active work against it. It depends on the capacity to take a fairly long view.

I don't and can't despise this. People who adopt this strategy have often done so in some degree of (understandable) disillusion, even despair, about more 'activist' opinions. But the ambiguities are enormous. Such a policy attains its ends by—to some extent—distancing black Christians from their background; it creates a warm, friendly and joyful interracial enclave *of a purely religious*

*character*; it softens the sense of urgency about large-scale change, and so risks blunting sensitivity towards the present suffering of the black population; it restores to whites a sense of power to bring about change—a sense which, because it relies so heavily on achievements in the private sphere, is in danger of terrible illusion in the light of the hardening and polarizing of society as a whole. And none of this requires the Church as such to manifest its disjunction from the social order as such in South Africa. For better or worse, the ‘private evangelism’ option deepens the mistrust and suspicion with which the Church is increasingly regarded among politically sensitive Africans.

Here is a story, told us by a nice, devoted, gentle white Anglican priest of charismatic convictions. In his first parish, he had worked with generosity and dedication in the local black township, organizing a lively youth club; after a while, some members of the youth club came and asked him why he didn’t have more to say in the pulpit about ‘the struggle’. He replied that he had a ministry to all the people in his parish, and had no wish to take sides. ‘When the revolution comes’, they said, ‘what will you be saying then?’. ‘Just what I’m saying now’, he replied, ‘and you’re not going to shoot me for that, are you?’. ‘Yes, we’ll shoot you’, they said.

His hurt and shock were still very raw, some years later, as he told us this. And he went on to tell us how he’d taken this story to a black priest with whom he was friendly: the priest had said, ‘I’d shoot you too, to spare you worse pain and humiliation’.

The tragedy of this story is not, perhaps, what had so wounded him—ingratitude, vengefulness, or whatever: so far as we could gather from him, there’s been no purely personal hatred or resentment involved. But he had had no means of coping with the fact that his commitment to a preaching of the gospel without taking sides had, unknown to him, prevented him from addressing the real situation of those he most longed to serve. And his black friend’s enigmatic response seemed to be saying, ‘You won’t be able to live with the pain of not being able to reach the people you love with the gospel you love’.

And so we come up against the harshest question in the South African situation. If constitutional change is impossible, how is change brought about except by counter-violence? The black population can’t vote (except in the ‘homelands’, where the available political alternatives are tightly controlled by the Republic, and police-state repression is at least as severe as in South Africa itself); non-violent action—strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience—provokes the same invariable mindless brutality. Striking workers, protesting schoolchildren, community leaders presiding over unarmed crowds, have all been shot dead by riot police at various times in the last couple of years (and long before). The most peaceful demonstration is

dispersed with teargas and whips (as this year during the Indian elections); any disorder (children throwing stones) is met with gunfire. As usual, the innocent die; and this can't be discussed without mentioning also the white baby killed in Soweto two weeks ago by a stone thrown through a car window by a black teenager. A horrific accident; but not many deaths there are accidents. In thirty years, non-violent action has occasionally won a small concession (the keeping open of bus routes, things like that); it has made no dent on the administration in itself. And large scale civil disobedience in the black communities would require immense commitment, high political motivation and tight organization: the first two *might* be generated, even in deeply demoralized communities (Martin Luther King achieved it in the American South); but organization means time for planning, and a degree of security and confidentiality among those involved. The ever-present system of police informers makes the latter practically unthinkable: trust is systematically eroded by almost universal suspicion. And the nature of working conditions in the cities leaves little time or energy for political education and activity (no accident, of course).

As for change through outside pressure, economic blockade and isolation—this is so patently the swiftest way to effect some sort of change, and so patently the least likely thing to happen. It would cost *us*, the rest of the world something, and that is too dreadful to be contemplated.

What then?

Max's bomb, described in court as being made of a tin filled with a mixture of sulphur, saltpetre and charcoal, was found before it exploded and he was arrested within twenty-four hours. Others were more or less successful and it all began again, and worse than it had ever been before; raids, arrests, detentions without trial. The white people who were kind to their pets and servants were shocked at bombs and bloodshed, just as they had been shocked in 1960, when the police fired on the men, women and children outside the Sharpeville pass office. They can't stand the sight of blood; and again gave, to those who have no vote, the humane advice that the decent way to bring about change is by constitutional means. The liberal-minded whites whose protests, petitions and outspokenness have achieved nothing remarked the inefficiency of the terrorists and the wasteful senselessness of their attempts. You cannot hope to unseat the great alabaster backside with a tin-pot bomb. Why risk your

life? *The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life.* I didn't understand, until then. Madness, God, yes, it was; but why should the brave ones among us be forced to be mad?

(Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World*, Gollancz, 1966, pp 92–93).

Revolutionary violence in South Africa seems both inevitable and hopeless—as Nadine Gordimer so poignantly tells us. Inevitable because of the lack of other means of change; hopeless because of the wholesale militarization of the Republic—increasing conscription, enormous defence spending (and a probable nuclear capacity), the active destabilization of neighbouring states which have been sanctuaries for dissidents. The African National Congress, once a non-violent body, now banned in the Republic, is in a very precarious position in its various places of refuge, and its hosts and allies—like Lesotho—are made to suffer terribly by the Republic. It is not in any position to mount a coherent military offensive; the Republic is unlikely to face within its borders the situation it confronts in Namibia.

The difference between SWAPO in Namibia (another formerly non-violent body) and would-be guerillas in the Republic is significant from the Church's point of view. It is, I think, intelligible that most Christian leaders and congregations in Namibia regard the activities of SWAPO as part of a legitimate war of self-defence against an entirely barbaric and murderous (as well as technically illegal) campaign by the South African Defence Force. If you hold some kind of just war theory, defence by a popularly supported body against massacre, rape, torture, and all the other techniques of the SADF and its paramilitary units in Namibia cannot be condemned. But in the Republic, violence against the status quo is necessarily more random and arbitrary; and we have seen enough in this country of campaigns of random terror not to wish it on even the most appalling society. Fr Buti Thlagale, an influential Roman Catholic priest in Soweto, has spoken of the car bombs and limpet mines in the Republic as a 'symbolic gesture' by the ANC; but this is only a hair's breadth from what another Soweto priest described to me as 'nihilistic' violence—a mere release of tension or expression of rage and frustration.

So when Desmond Tutu and other courageous people in the Republic both deplore the random guerilla attack and warn of worsening fear and instability as nihilistic violence grows, they are showing a difficult honesty—the kind of honesty which has so fully earned Bishop Desmond his Nobel Prize. No-one can be surprised or disgusted if the daily aggression of the South African Government provokes counter-attack; yet no Christian can easily see this as a path

to be encouraged or shared. Unless you have a Franz Fanon-like view of violence as purifying, cathartic, a view which must seem self-indulgent to a Christian, you're bound to see the randomness of 'terrorist' activity as something not only refusing to draw just and necessary limits but destroying hopes of long-term rapprochement, because it utterly destroys trust. It is, in fact, an image of the indiscriminate and fragmenting violence of the South African state itself.

But there *is* more to be said. It is *very* easy to condemn all this; but what is the Church actually doing when it does so? It is claiming a moral authority which it is widely felt not to have—because of its refusal to distance itself from the *state's* violence: it supplies chaplains to the SADF (chaplains whom the bishop of Namibia has refused to recognize in his diocese); it permits members of the security police to hold office in congregations (as churchwardens or elders or council members). 'The Church' here, by the way, means not the white Dutch Reformed Churches, which do not begin to come into the debate, but churches with some record of resistance, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Congregationalist and so on. Consequently, the Church's condemnations of 'terrorism' are bound to sound like a reinforcement of the pervasive sense of helplessness in black communities, an implicit endorsement of the system, and an exhortation to passivity.

More painfully, though, the Church deludes itself anyway, in believing it has the power to affect the political choices of the African population. The truth is that no black people are waiting for the Church to pronounce on 'violence' before they decide to act; they (including many Church members) have assumed their own authority to decide. My priest friend in Soweto said, 'My problem isn't advising people whether or not to become militants, but counselling and supporting those whose minds are made up'. History, he said, has overtaken the Church: it lost both moral and political initiative long ago. And, like some charismatics, fleeing from the powerlessness of the public realm to the power of the Holy Spirit in the private, the spokesmen of the Church struggle to hold on to the belief that their moral conviction carries political weight.

A brief reminder of what I said at the beginning: like the rest of the world but more so.

What if the Church has *nothing* to say to the ANC guerilla? What if it has to confront in silence and penitence and uselessness its own blurring or muffling of the gospel? The authority to speak to the despairingly violent is hard-won, because it grows out of something the mainstream churches in South Africa (and elsewhere) are bad at: taking decisions and risks that are as costly as those taken by the violent. Desmond Tutu has something of this authority; Steve Biko—always typically ironic, elusive and teasing on such issues, yet

critical of unreflective militancy—had it; Beyers Naudé has it (and thank God that this great man is now at liberty again to exercise it).

But the Church at large in South Africa (*and...*) will acquire it only by something approaching a wholesale reconstruction of its priorities. What sort of communities nourish people with the resources to continue with small-scale direct action, with potentially dangerous acts of disobedience and protest? It may be that the Church as a Church must be committed—as in parts of Latin America—to the business of raising critical awareness, training in co-operative and self-supportive skills and the exploration of appropriate ‘gestures’ in defiance of the status quo (boycotts and so on). But this is bound to be an unsatisfactory and provisional solution. The limitations on possibilities here are, as I’ve already said, very severe—certainly as far as the black population is concerned. For white people— a *little* less vulnerable in these contexts—there are perhaps more openings for bolder kinds of non-violent protest. The problem is the lack of a will for this in white churches; and that brings us back to the challenge posed to the Church itself by these difficulties. Will anything short of a split in the Church, the emergence of a ‘confessing’ movement explicitly dedicated to resistance to apartheid, effect the necessary shift? This development has now occurred in the ‘coloured’ branch of the Dutch Reformed Church, but no other church seems eager to follow suit. Nor is there, outside some radical Roman Catholic circles, much thought about the creation of ‘base communities’ on the Latin American model, communities generating critical awareness of the situation, tensions, and hopes of a concrete locality, focussed in worship and reflection. The recently formed Institute for Contextual Theology in Soweto holds out some real hope here, though.

So all this *is* vague and unsatisfying. Perhaps the bleakest reading of the situation is that represented by one white priest’s comment to us: ‘All I can do is to prepare my people to die well’. Is the Church there to train martyrs, to produce the costly and materially ‘unsuccessful’ witness of a Beyers Naudé? That is a tempting picture—for someone outside the situation, speaking from a comfortable distance. I only feel able to mention it because there are those in the situation who have the authority to say this sort of thing and *have* said it.

It’s a kind of madness: a Church committed to the suffering consequent on active, consistent, inventive non-violence, knowing how little can be changed by it; a madness like that of ‘symbolic violence’. But to the believer in human liberty and dignity in South Africa, it comes to a choice between one madness or the other, for the simple reason that South African society is far more insane than either. It is a state incapable of self-awareness, self-criticism, rational dialogue, pluralism and, above all, planned and realistic change. If the



primary responsibility for change must be with those who have the power for it, then South Africa has a huge and destructive vacuum there. But other nations still have some power to pressure the Republic into change; and they too ignore or trivialize their responsibility (how greatly our government's reception of P.W. Botha earlier this year consolidated his position in white South Africa!) 'The international community', wrote Desmond Tutu in 1981, 'must make up its mind whether it wants to see a peaceful resolution of the South African crisis or not' (*Hope and Suffering*, Fount, 1984).

Those who have power to decide do not have the will. The Church of Christ, which has—to however limited an extent—the will does not have the power: not least (now) because it has long been so slow to use what power it has. Meanwhile, people continue to die. The gospel tells us, among other things, that God's cause in the world is the cause of those helpless victims of the aggression of white wealth and greed. It does not ask us to wallow in guilt or self-abasement, but it does demand that we look hard and candidly at what we can do to bring political will to our own country in its dealings with South Africa, and to bring power to our fellow believers there—by the active awareness and support that makes it harder for the South African Government to ban, detain or murder Christian leaders, by our efforts to keep in touch with the Church in the Republic and help its clergy and teachers to travel, study and grow in imagination and resource; and by persisting hard prayer. *Nkosi sikhelel'i Africa*: God bless Africa; guide her rulers, guard her children, give her peace, for Jesus Christ's sake.

## **Prophet and Apostle: Bartolomé de las Casas and the spiritual conquest of America**

David Brading

*A paper given at Oxford on 31 October 1984, one of a series of lectures sponsored by Oxford University and the English Dominicans to mark the 500th anniversary of the birth of the "Defender of the Indians".*

### **I: Defender of the Indians or Satan's tool?**

In his *De procuranda indorum salute* (1589) the Spanish Jesuit, José