

IS THERE AN ETHIC OF VIOLENCE?

By WALTER WINK

THE EDITORS HAVE ASKED me to deal with the 'ethics of violence'. Is non-violence a one-sided presentation of the gospel message, they query, and must we necessarily say that a violent response to injustice, whether personal or social, is always immoral or, at best, when inevitable in extreme circumstances, the lesser of two evils?

I will not pretend to be neutral on this issue. I am not at all sure that there is an 'ethics of violence'. There are, it seems to me, several rather simple things that Christians might affirm concerning violence:

1. Jesus and the entire New Testament, and virtually without exception the whole of the early Church up to the time of Constantine (312 C.E.), taught and practised non-violence.
2. Oppressive violence is always evil. Counter-violence that seeks to stop oppressive violence also creates evil. There can be no *justification* for counter-violence (i.e., 'violence in this particular situation is good'). Violence is never good.
3. There is, in the New Testament, no basis for the 'just war' argument, and absolutely no justification for a 'holy war'.
4. The argument from necessity is not an ethical argument. Ethics requires choice; necessity implies no choice. A person or a nation may feel that it *must* fight in order to prevent an even greater evil. But that does not cause the lesser evil to cease being evil.
5. Theologically, we cannot justify ourselves either by counter-violence *or* by non-violent acts. If we are pressed by a perceived necessity to act in ways that create evil in order to oppose a greater evil, we must not argue that such acts are 'just', 'right', or 'good', when they clearly are not. All we can claim is that they appear to us to be necessary. But we can neither regard ourselves saved nor damned nor justified by such acts, whether they be counter-violent or non-violent.
6. Those who act non-violently have no more assurance that they are 'righteous' than those that do counter-violence. No one can

presume upon the sole prerogative of God by judging anyone who participates in counter-violent or non-violent acts. We can only bear witness to why we choose whichever path we have taken.

7. If we are unable, for lack of imagination or courage or support, to respond to injustice non-violently, it may be better to respond violently than to endure it passively without protest. Even if counter-violence appears to be the only responsible choice, that still does not make violence right. (This is the point of the much-misunderstood participation of Bonhoeffer in the death-plot against Hitler: he never attempted to baptize it as just. He insisted that it was a sin, and threw himself on the mercy of God.)

The rest of this article will be my bearing witness to my own choice for militant non-violent direct action—or what some in South Africa are calling ‘unarmed direct action’. But I want to make clear from the outset my respect for all who struggle against evil, by whatever means, however counterproductive from my point of view. If I presume on the prerogatives of God by judging anyone, it is those who accept evil without a struggle.

Jesus clearly taught non-violence, though the text which most clearly presents his position, Mt 5, 38–41, has been grossly misunderstood. For most people, ‘turn the other cheek’ means letting people slap you around and walk all over you. The statement, ‘If anyone sues you for your outer garment, give up your undergarment as well’, has been heard as counselling victims to abandon all sense of justice and even to connive in their own despoiling. ‘If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two’ has degenerated into a trite platitude meaning, ‘Go out of your way, extend yourself—go the second mile’.

Jesus was, on the contrary, teaching the oppressed a new way of responding to their oppressors. The blow on the *right* cheek could only have been a backhand. He is referring to the way masters humiliate servants, or husbands their wives, or parents their children. The purpose of backhanding is not injury but reminding an underling of his or her place. Turning the other cheek, then, would be an act of defiance. Logistically, it is now impossible to repeat the backhand (this must be physically acted out to see the problem), and a blow by the fist would establish the equality of both parties—the last thing any of these strikers wishes to achieve. The subordinate is saying, in effect: you cannot humiliate me any longer, I am a human being, just like you; you may have me flogged, but you cannot demean me.

When a creditor sues you for your outer garment, Jesus says, try this: take off all your clothes and parade naked out of court! Or when a Roman soldier impresses you to carry his pack one mile—the statutory limit under military law—place him in jeopardy with his superiors by carrying his pack a second mile. In all three examples he urges his formerly supine hearers to take the initiative in finding tactics which catch the oppressor by surprise, force him into a new relationship with the oppressed, push custom and law to the point of absurdity, burlesque power, meet force with ridicule or humour, and expose the injustice of the system.

Jesus's thesis statement, 'Resist not evil', is at the root of much of the misunderstanding. The Greek word translated 'resist' (*antistēnai*) is used in the majority of cases in the Greek Old Testament and Josephus to refer to *violent* resistance, warfare, insurrection, revolt or riot. In the context of Jesus's saying it means, do not counter violence with violence, do not return evil with evil, do not mirror the oppressor's methods, do not resist evil *violently*. I have dealt with this passage at greater length in *Violence and nonviolence in South Africa*,¹ and urge the interested reader to pursue the discussion there.

Violence feeds on violence. It has the capacity to turn whoever uses it into the likeness of the oppressor. No one touches violence and remains unscathed. But Jesus is not calling us to forswear violence in order to be pure. Those who have never lifted a finger in violence may be no closer to God than a convicted murderer. Rather, we are to resist violence because it is the realm of Satan, the system of imposed power by which the nations and their economies are run (Mt 4, 1-11 par; Mk 10, 35-45; Mk 10, 17-31, etc.).

Put more positively, Jesus proclaimed a new reality, the Reign of God, which people did not have to wait on a violent revolution to enjoy, but which can be entered here, now, even under the conditions of repression. The servant does not wait to be freed, but simply begins behaving as a free person. The debtor does not have to wait on a whole new economic system, but begins living in the old unjust one in a way that depotentiates the creditor. The civilian does not wait until the Romans have been overthrown, but begins acting in ways that confuse and disorient their oppressors, now. The Reign of God is already breaking into the world, and it does so by ending the reign of violence. The enemy is to be loved;

the followers of Jesus break the spiral of violence by absorbing its blows with their own bodies.

It is not necessary to be a 'pacifist' in order to adopt Jesus's way of non-violence. 'Pacifism' sounds too much like 'passivity', and is too narrowly focused on peace. Peace is not the goal, but justice. Peace is a by-product of justice. Furthermore, some pacifists have been deeply influenced by philosophical idealism and an absolutist ethics, and have appeared to be willing to allow loved ones to be killed without defending them rather than sacrifice their own non-violent principles.

The position taken here is much simpler. Jesus calls us to non-violent, active opposition to evil. Non-violence is not an option for Christians. It is the essence of the gospel. Therefore those who are non-violent should not be called pacifists, but Christians. The Christian is to attempt to live non-violently, knowing that when he or she fails to do so, God forgives us and sets us back on the path of non-violent resistance. The Christian does not live non-violently in order to be saved, or in order to live up to an absolute ethical norm, but because God's grace makes it possible to do so.

Non-violence is thus not a counsel of perfection for the few, but a mundane, practical possibility for everyone. There is that of God in each of us, whether we know it and name it or not, which makes it possible for us to act lovingly toward oppressors even in the midst of non-violent conflict. Jesus's way is thus a way that everyone can embrace, Christian or not, but it lays a special claim on Christians. In short, Jesus's is a way of non-violence for the violent.

The world is only beginning to grasp the implications of this message of non-violence. The very word 'non-violence' has only been in coinage since the 1920s. There have been non-violent protests scattered throughout history, but only in this century have they begun to proliferate, and in the last decade they have been multiplying at an exponential rate. Yet few people recognize what is happening. What we are experiencing is the growth of the power of the National Security State to such levels of technical might that armed revolution has become increasingly impracticable. All over the world, non-violence is being used, not because of strong philosophical or spiritual commitments, but simply because all other avenues of resistance are closed.

Solidarity took on the combined might of the Communist government of Poland and the Soviet empire, and after nine years of

non-violent struggle and repeated announcements even in the Western press that it had been crushed, has now actually taken over the government! Its casualties—two to three hundred. The government's—zero.

The phenomenal Philippine revolution that overthrew the dictator Marcos was accomplished by the training of *half a million* non-violent poll watchers, some of whom died trying to protect the ballot boxes. That revolution is sadly foundering today, as the landed class and the army attempt to prevent needed changes, but nothing can tarnish the accomplishment of those five days that unseated a tyrant.

No one was supposed to be able to use non-violence against the ruthless Communists, we were told. It only works against the 'genial' British, as in Gandhi's campaign for independence in India, or with the 'nice' Americans, as in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights struggle. But in just the past year there have been demonstrations all over the Soviet Union, plus unauthorized labour strikes, and a human chain of two to three million protesters that ran the entire length of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. And in East Germany, non-violent demonstrations and a flood of refugees have brought down iron-fisted Erich Honecker, the Communist party chairman, and every indicator suggests that this is but the beginning of the changes.

The list could go on indefinitely, as new non-violent protests arise almost by the day: South Koreans, Native Americans, Brazilian *campesinos*, Chilean urban slum-dwellers, the mothers of the 'disappeared' in Guatemala and El Salvador, Greenpeace actions against polluters, the Pittston coal strike in Virginia, the Palestinian *intefadah*, the New Caledonia Independence Movement, nuclear testing protests in Nevada and in Soviet Kazakhstan, the stunning student/worker protests in China, demonstrations at U.S. missile bases and at the Pantex nuclear bomb plant in Amarillo, Texas, the Clamshell Alliance against nuclear power, sit-ins at South African embassies—to mention only a few such struggles in the past year alone.

There has never been an ethical case for violence. People have simply used it because it seems to 'work', and all other avenues seem closed. Now, increasingly, from small-scale protests to national struggles, non-violence is becoming the method of choice on purely pragmatic grounds. The fact that non-violence often 'works' does not make it preferable to violence, for violence also

'works' at times. I will try, however, to make a practical case for non-violence in order to win a hearing for it from hard-headed people of action. Perhaps they will later find themselves acting their way into the spirituality of non-violence as well.

First, violence is increasingly being seen as counter-productive. The Colombian government declared war on its drug-lords after the murder of scores of judges and a presidential candidate. I could not help rejoicing; maybe that will slow the flood of cocaine into the States. A few days later, bombs went off all over Colombia as the drug-lords declared war on Colombia! I should have known better. No one can win this war. Drug profits are such that a dozen new dealers will rise up for every one killed or incarcerated. This 'war' is destroying the free press in Colombia and will soon bring down the democratic government. Our violent resistance increases the evil: if we intercept and destroy twenty-two tons of cocaine, the world price simply goes up, making the drug trade more lucrative. This failed attempt at a second Prohibition will not succeed any more than the first one against alcohol. Only the legalization and regulation of drugs will destroy its profitability and reduce the crimes associated with it. Violent resistance only gives energy to evil.

Second, violent warfare limits the involvement of partisans to mostly young, able-bodied men. Non-violence, on the other hand, is egalitarian. Everyone can participate, from babies to the elderly. What the cause loses in firepower is more than made up for by people power. And the struggle itself becomes an education in democratic organization that conscientizes the masses and prepares them for self-government. Elitist struggles almost invariably lead to rule by an élite.

Likewise, those who advocate violence, especially intellectuals, seldom engage in it themselves, leaving it to others to hazard what they so glibly advocate. Those who encourage non-violence, on the other hand, invariably engage in non-violent actions, subjecting themselves to the risk of beatings, arrest and even death.

Third, in non-violent struggles the casualties are always less than in armed insurgencies, and they are usually limited to those involved, whereas in hot war as many as ninety per cent of the casualties may be unarmed civilians. India and Algeria offer a fruitful comparison. It took the Indians twenty-seven years and 8,000 lives (out of a population of 400 million, or one in 50,000) to win independence non-violently from the British. It took the

Algerians seven and a half years and almost a million lives (out of a population of ten million, or one in ten) to gain freedom violently from the French—a casualty rate 5,000 times higher than India's.² We cannot ignore the implications of such statistics, for the comparative degree of carnage is a *moral* issue.

Fourth, non-violence *fails* better than violence. The armed revolt in Hungary was crushed by the Soviets at the cost of somewhere between 10,000 to 25,000 dead and 150,000 wounded, while 40,000 more people were imprisoned, tortured or detained and 200,000 went into exile. In the Czechoslovakian 'spring', where a spontaneous non-violent resistance was mounted, only seventy died, and the subsequent repression was also proportionately less.

For some reason, people have a double standard for violence and non-violence. Violence is believed to 'work' no matter how many times it fails, and non-violence is believed not to work if it can be shown to have failed even once. People in South Africa repeated to me over and over, 'We tried non-violence for fifty years and it didn't work'. As one theologian put it,

We have a long history of non-violence in our country. To raise the issue of non-violence now is almost to insult Black South African people . . . people have decided that the only way to deal with apartheid is through armed struggle.³

The myth of the failure of non-violence in South Africa needs to be exploded, because it prevents effective resistance to the apartheid regime. From 1913 on, when African women in the Orange Free State averted the extension of pass laws to them by refusing to carry passes, South African blacks have been engaged in non-violent actions of slowly growing frequency and intensity. The years 1952-60 marked a period of explicit non-violence and accelerated actions. It ended with the massacre at Sharpeville, when sixty-nine people were killed and one hundred and eighty-six wounded. Many at the time interpreted that tragedy as indicating that non-violence had not 'worked'. But a similar event in the Indian struggle, when British troops mowed down an unarmed group of men, women and children, killing 379 and wounding 1,137, only led to deepened commitment to non-violence there. The difference lay in interpretation. Governmental repression is inevitable, and when it comes, is usually more severe than anticipated. Governmental overreaction helps, as nothing else, to radicalize the formerly passive, win international support and build the

movement. In retrospect we can now see that all this in fact *did* happen as a result of Sharpeville. Those people did not die in vain, as the proponents of violence imply, but faithfully at their posts. Non-violence has its casualties no less than all-out war, and requires the same willingness to sacrifice.

In the early stages of a revolution, and in fact, often right up to the moment of victory, *neither* non-violence nor violence 'works', in the sense of bringing the government to its knees. Their purpose at that stage is to *build a movement*, and it is often the failure to distinguish those goals that leads to disillusionment, just when the movement's development is right on schedule.⁴

Nor did the suppression of organizations and arrests of leaders subsequent to Sharpeville break the resistance. Since 1960, opposition has escalated in ever more frequent outbreaks of non-violent acts, each wave involving greater and greater numbers of people. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of armed struggle, leaders of all the major Churches except the white Dutch Reformed, met in May, 1988 and endorsed 'effective non-violent actions', and the unions, women's groups, and the United Democratic Front continue to be committed to non-violent struggle. The dramatic demonstrations of late summer and fall, 1989, have displayed an unprecedented degree of highly disciplined and conscious non-violent resistance. The vast majority of South African Blacks has *not* decided that 'the only way to deal with apartheid is through armed struggle'. Quite the opposite; the only effective resistance to apartheid in South Africa today is coming from non-violent struggle: rent strikes, prison hunger strikes, labour strikes, sit-downs, slow-downs, stop-pages, stay-aways, school boycotts, bus boycotts, consumer boycotts, funeral demonstrations, defiance of segregation orders at beaches, hospitals, schools, restaurants, theatres, hotels, non-cooperation with government bureaucrats, the shunning of Black police and soldiers, violation of laws on residency and housing, the illegal singing of liberation songs on buses and trains, and so forth—probably the largest grassroots eruption of diverse non-violent strategies in a single struggle in human history!

Fifth, oppressive powers prefer to counter violence. They have a monopoly on fire-power, and they are trained to use it. Non-violence makes them nervous. Because they project their own penchant for violence onto the non-violent opposition, they generally overreact, creating a massive outpouring of sympathy for their unarmed victims. The very style of non-violence is alien to their

thinking. Consequently, whatever they do works against them. If they allow the demonstrators to defy the law, they grant them victory. If they attack them, they help them gain credibility and numbers. The South African government finally, in exasperation, outlawed non-violence in 1986, declaring calls for an end to conscription, or criticism of the government and its officers, or support of boycotts, to be sedition punishable by ten years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. They could have paid non-violence no higher compliment. After a short pause, non-violent demonstrations were back in full swing, and in September, 1989, demonstrators won from the government, for the first time, the right to march peacefully without police opposition.

The paradox of the powerlessness of force becomes most apparent here: having declared every avenue of protest illegal, and having incarcerated and tortured their victims for months without charging them, the South African government has created an atmosphere of repression so extreme that no new legislation or punishment can increase the fear. People are simply no longer asking what the government allows, and doing what has to be done to win freedom.

Let us grant that non-violence works, sometimes. Does it work *always*? Are there situations where it simply cannot be applied, where counter-violence is the only way out? World War II is often cited as a case where violence was not only necessary but justified. The fact is, however, that non-violence was successful whenever it was used against Hitler: the Norwegian judges and teachers that resisted the Aryanization of Norway; the efforts of the whole village of Le Chambon in rescuing thousands of Jews; the Bulgarian bishop who lay down on the tracks in Sofia and prevented a trainload of Jews from being sent to concentration camps; the German wives of Jews who demonstrated on behalf of their husbands in Berlin in the midst of the war and won their release, and so on.

I can even conceive of a scenario in which the teaching of non-violence would have been so integral to the training of German Christians that a person like Hitler could be countered and stopped by wholly non-violent means before he could even get started. But that work simply had not been done in Germany. If anything, the two-realm theology aided Hitler's project, rendering the Churches docile and complicit. Consequently, violent resistance (the Second World War) appeared to be the only course left. But we can now see, with the perspective of time, that those who fought Hitler were

not doing 'good' by firebombing German cities and killing their 'enemies' on the other side.

Nor did the allies emerge unscathed from that encounter with evil. Britain was bled dry by the struggle and suffered precipitous political and economic decline. The United States, which emerged with its industrial might intact, took up the mantle of empire and became in many ways what the Nazis themselves had aspired to be: the world's leading militaristic state, manipulating elections around the world, assassinating third-world leaders, intervening in other nations and imposing its will through threat, violence and economic retaliation. The nations that gasped at Hitler's genocide of the Jews are now poised to commit ecocide, the terminal genocide of virtually all living things on the planet, in order to preserve their bits of hegemony around the world. Such is the power of violence that even its use to destroy a flagrant evil recoils against the users and makes them over into the likeness of the enemy.

In short, there may have been no practical alternative to World War II, but that necessity does not translate into justification. That was not 'the last just war', as some have proclaimed it. It was simply the last war in which a gullible public was willing to be deceived about its justice.

We want so desperately to think well of ourselves that we baptize necessity as right. But the kingdom of necessity knows no ethics. It is the opposite of the realm of God. It is the domain of death. Fighting a war and declaring it just is merely a ruse to rid ourselves of guilt. But we can no more free ourselves of guilt by decree than we can declare ourselves righteous by fiat. If we have killed, it is a sin, and only God can forgive us, not a propaganda apparatus that declares our dirty wars 'just'.

Am I making myself clear? Governments and guerrilla chiefs are not endowed with the power to absolve us from sin. Only God can do that. And God is not mocked. The whole discussion of 'just' wars is sub-Christian.

I leave it to the individual conscience how one should respond in any given crisis to the use of force. There are apocalyptic moments when an oppressive power has squandered every chance for repentance, when the outrage of the people can no longer be restrained, when the opportunity for non-violent change has been forfeited. Then violence will inevitably explode. When that happened in Jerusalem in 66 C.E., the Christians fled across the Jordan River to Pella of the Decapolis. Perhaps—though we do

not know this—some stayed and fought and died in the ensuing slaughter. Which would we have chosen?

I cannot tell Christians in Nicaragua that they should not have fought against the Contras. All I can insist on is that they resist the temptation to transgress on the prerogatives of God by declaring their warfare righteous. Nor do I condemn their use of violence. I am not even sure I can conceive of a non-violent alternative that would have been viable for them. Living by faith, however, means believing that there is no situation in which it is impossible to be faithful to the gospel. And the gospel is non-violent.

I have dealt with the issue of violence here only on pragmatic grounds, with scarcely any mention of the imperative to love our enemies, or of the philosophical and spiritual foundations of non-violence. I have treated them more fully in the above mentioned book on South Africa. I myself can scarcely imagine mustering the courage required for a non-violent lifestyle apart from a vital faith in God, but I recognize that there are many who do so. I hope I have at least succeeded in suggesting that, even on purely practical grounds, non-violence is, in most cases, a viable alternative to violence, and that it has become the strategy of the future.

NOTES

¹ *Violence and nonviolence in South Africa* (New Society Publishers, 4527 Springfield Ave, Philadelphia, PA, USA, 1987), pp 12–34.

² It appears to be impossible to get accurate figures for the deaths in the Algerian war. Estimates range all the way from 1.5 million to 1 million to 600,000 (not counting the disappeared) to 434,000 to 314,000 to 220,000. Because civilian deaths were only poorly recorded at best, a best guess would seem to be between 800,000 and a million. Even taking the lowest figure, however, one out of 45 people in the war would have been killed—still an astronomically high proportion (1111 times higher than in India).

³ Carol Wickersham: 'An interview with Dr. Itumeleng Mosala', *JPIC Forum*, 1/5 (1989).

⁴ See Bill Moyer's excellent analysis of the *stages* of non-violent struggle, *The movement action plan*, (Social Movement Empowerment Project, 721 Shrader St, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA, \$1.00 plus postage).