
Beyond Just War and Pacifism

Nonviolent Struggle towards Justice,
Freedom and Peace

Gene Sharp

Nonviolent struggle as a realistic option

Although major advances have been made, the world is still a long way from achievement of justice, freedom and peace. A major political and moral issue is how those goals may be achieved. This article first explores briefly the potential role of nonviolent struggle in advancing those goals, then surveys official statements by several Christian churches and ecumenical bodies on the potential contributions of nonviolent action to achieve those objectives. Together, this exploration and these statements have implications for a reconsideration of the current relevance of the traditional just war and pacifist contending positions. They also have implications for constructive action to develop the consideration and application of nonviolent struggle.

This discussion is based on the following assumptions:

- It is desirable for religious believers to deal responsibly with the issue of how to apply their principles to meet the problems of people who live in a very imperfect world and who face violations of justice, freedom and peace.
- We all share a responsibility to help people to achieve those goals themselves, to lift their oppression and to prevent and defeat violence and aggression against them.

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— It is necessary and desirable to work with people with differing convictions who share a commitment to justice, freedom and peace and a willingness to act in ways which are compatible with moral principles and which respect human dignity.

We are using the terms “justice”, “freedom” and “peace” in the following senses:

Social justice is a condition in which all people are treated fairly and with respect, without domination, exploitation or oppression. The achievement of social justice is likely to require both means of struggle for popular empowerment and also means of constructing a more just society.

Freedom includes democratic participation in decision-making, personal and civil liberties and respect for others. It is always imperfectly achieved. New dangers to freedoms may arise from unexpected sources. Even in the best of democracies, there are often restrictions on civil liberties, manipulative controls may be applied and threats to democratic structures may arise from coups d'état and expansionist regimes. These require effective countermeasures. We also need potent programmes to prevent the rise of new dictatorships and to disintegrate existing ones.

Peace, as defined here, is the absence of or the ending of military hostilities between contending states or other fighting units (as in a civil war). A society at peace will be imperfect and usually will encompass internal conflicts and efforts to improve the society while preserving its meritorious qualities.

Peace does not always come to those who are peaceful. Peace is far from assured, despite the end of the cold war. Frequently peace is violated by military aggression, coups d'état, civil wars, bloodbaths and mass slaughters. Continuing threats to peace are posed by massive accumulations of military weaponry and the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Defence is needed against violations of peace. Important questions are: (1) How can defence be achieved without contributing to massive slaughters and violating religious and humane barriers against massive violence? and (2) How can attacks be prevented and defeated and peace be restored which is compatible with justice and freedom?

The goals of justice, freedom and peace are generally recognized to be good. The problems mostly concern how to achieve and preserve them. If people are not passively to submit to oppression and attacks, they must have effective means of wielding power. It is usually assumed that against great evil it is necessary to wage military struggle, perhaps with certain restrictions on the means used (*ius in bello*).

People have usually considered that alternative means of effective struggle without violence are unavailable. Violence has been perceived as the means of last resort, assumed almost axiomatically to be the most powerful means of struggle that can be used. Conflicts will clearly continue to exist in the future. In acute conflicts, if people see violence to be their most effective option, they will continue to choose violence to wage their struggle. That choice has repeatedly had its own catastrophic consequences.

However, if we see only violence as available to wage powerful struggle, we will fail to notice a major sign of hope for humanity: the growth and significance of another type of conflict, “the other ultimate sanction” — nonviolent struggle. It is sometimes also called people power, political defiance, nonviolent action, non-cooperation or civil resistance.

We should remember well the “people power” revolution in the Philippines in 1986, the ten-year nonviolent struggle in Poland which ended with the collapse of the communist system, the East German revolution and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989, the defeat of the hard-line coup in the Soviet Union in 1991. These struggles in recent years were of world significance; yet many people have already forgotten them or explained them away.

Many other cases of nonviolent struggle have occurred. Among the best known are the Gandhian struggles for India’s independence in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and the US civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. But those are not typical of the vast range of nonviolent struggles. Other important cases include women’s demonstrations in Berlin in 1943 to save their Jewish husbands, the struggle of the Norwegian teachers in 1942 against the fascist government’s efforts to control the schools, the undermining of the military dictatorships of El Salvador and Guatemala in 1944, the pressure of boycotts and strikes in the 1980s in South Africa against injustices of the apartheid system. Older campaigns include the international struggles of women for the right to vote and the organization and strikes by workers in numerous countries for the right to organize and to seek fair wages and better working conditions. Nonviolent action has at times proved to be more powerful and more effective than violence.

These and other cases are relevant to finding better solutions to the moral and political problems facing us in efforts to achieve and defend justice, freedom and peace. They do not present a panacea for ongoing vast slaughters. But under certain conditions the means of nonviolent struggle applied in acute conflicts have offered a way out of cyclical predations of violence and are an option for the future.

Nonviolent struggle employs other types of power than does violence. Nonviolent action offers an alternative to violence for achieving and defending justice, freedom and peace — an approach more compatible with Christian principles and social responsibilities, an approach capable of effectiveness with fewer tragic consequences and more satisfactory long-term results.

The nature of nonviolent struggle

Nonviolent action is a technique for mobilizing and applying the power potential of people and groups for pursuing objectives and interests by non-military “weapons” — psychological, political, social, economic and spiritual.

Nonviolent action includes protest, non-cooperation and intervention without physical violence. People using this technique either refuse to do things they are expected or required to do, or they insist on doing things they normally do not do or which are forbidden. The classes of specific methods or forms of action are: nonviolent protest and persuasion (consisting of symbolic acts, such as vigils, marches and display of flags); non-cooperation (including social boycotts, economic boycotts, labour strikes and many types of political non-cooperation); and nonviolent intervention (including sit-ins, hunger strikes and parallel governments).

Faced with such a challenge to their very sources of power, opponents can be expected to apply repression. This repression, however, is often ineffective in halting the nonviolent struggle and can alienate various groups, so that the repression actually weakens the opponents and strengthens the nonviolent struggle group. That process has been called “political jiu-jitsu”: the violence of the opponents may rebound to undermine their own position.

When such struggles achieve success, they do so by one or a combination of four mechanisms: *conversion* (changing the opponents' opinions or beliefs); *accommodation* (compromising to gain part of one's objectives); *nonviolent coercion* (forcing the opponents to grant the demands); or *disintegration* (causing the opponents' system or government to fall completely apart).¹

Nonviolent struggle operates by mobilizing the power potential of people and institutions to enable them not only to wield power themselves but also to restrict or sever the sources of power of their opponents (such as authority or legitimacy, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors contributing to support or obedience, material resources and sanctions).

This type of struggle enables the pillars of support to be pulled out from under the temple of oppression. Let us focus for the moment on the oppression of a dictatorship or foreign occupation (recognizing that social and economic oppression also need to be uprooted). The power of all tyrants and oppressive systems, of all dictators and aggressors, depends upon the support they receive — acceptance by the populace of the oppressors' legitimacy and the duty to obey, the operation of the economic system, the continued functioning of the civil service and the bureaucracy, the obedience of the army, the reliability of the police, the blessing of religious bodies, the cooperation of workers and managers and the like.

If you first weaken, then reduce and finally withdraw the support of all those bodies of the society, you produce something like a greatly expanded and deepened political-social strike which restricts or severs the opponents' sources of power. We understand how workers by staying off the job can paralyze a factory. Think of a political society applying the same principle of non-cooperation against oppression: religious and moral leaders denounce the regime as meriting no obedience whatever and preach the duty of disobedience and nonviolent revolution against it; civil servants stay home or operate as they please, ignoring the orders of the regime; soldiers disobey and mutiny, or even join the demonstrators; police refuse to arrest patriotic resisters; capitalists and business managers shut down their economic activities; workers stay home on strike; transportation is shut down. Everything is paralyzed. Imagine a dictator under those conditions issuing orders for the revolution to be put down tomorrow — and being ignored by everyone.

To maximize the power of this nonviolent struggle, developing and applying wise strategy is highly important. Yet only rarely do those seeking to use this type of struggle fully recognize the critical importance of preparing a comprehensive strategic plan before they act. For various reasons resisters have often not even attempted to think and plan strategically how to accomplish their objective. As a result, the chances of success are drastically reduced, even eliminated. There is no plan to guide the use of one's own resources most effectively in order actually to gain the goals of the conflict. One's strength is dissipated. One's actions are ineffective. Sacrifices are wasted and one's cause is not well served.

By contrast, the formulation and adoption of sound strategies increase the chances of success.² One's strength and actions are focused to serve the main strategic objectives. Casualties may be reduced and the sacrifices may serve the main goal more effectively. Directed action in accordance with a strategic plan enables concentrating strengths to move towards the desired goal.

It is profoundly significant that this technique has been and can be used by people who reject a belief in the positive good of “nonviolence”, who do not accept a moral prohibition on the use of violence and who support the possibility of “justified war” under established criteria. In specific conflicts on behalf of issues such as liberation, justice and defence it is possible for masses of people who do not believe in “nonviolence” nevertheless to use this nonviolent technique instead of violence.

Contrary to the usual assumption, only rarely in the multitude of past cases of nonviolent struggle has principled nonviolence been a significant factor in adopting and implementing the technique. Pragmatic factors were very important even in the leadership of both Gandhi and Martin Luther King (both of whom are atypical in the history of leaders of nonviolent struggles). In various discussions with those involved in serious nonviolent conflicts — in the occupied West Bank, in Panama, in Beijing, in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and in many other cases — pragmatic considerations have always been cited in response to questions about the motives for choosing the means of nonviolent action.

Nonviolent struggle can be practised by imperfect people in an imperfect world, who are nevertheless able to act without use of violence. Such means are available to all people who share a desire for justice, freedom and peace. While few individuals are able to “turn the other cheek” in the spirit of love and forgiveness, many more are able to understand that for their particular objectives nonviolent action offers the best chances of success. Human stubbornness coupled with the assertion of human dignity and the use of nonviolent means has its virtues.

When this type of action is understood as a non-doctrinal technique, operating by understandable processes, capable of producing humane results more effectively and efficiently than violence, it has the potential to be widely adopted in situations in which people and institutions might otherwise resort to violence.

The historical growth of nonviolent action

Nonviolent struggle has a history that goes back many centuries. One example from the pre-Christian era occurred in Rome in 494 BCE, when the plebeians, rather than murder the consuls in an attempt to correct grievances, withdrew from the city to a hill (later called “the Sacred Mount”). There they remained for some days, refusing to make their usual contributions to the life of the city. An agreement was then reached pledging significant improvements in their life and status.³

Assessing historical trends in the use of nonviolent action is difficult, since there is nothing approximating a complete historical survey of its practice. But some well-informed scholars have suggested that this technique is being practised to a much greater extent in the late 20th century than previously. There clearly appears to be an acceleration in the incidence, scale and importance of the use of nonviolent struggle throughout much of the world.

As recently as 1980, few people would have thought that nonviolent struggle would within a decade be a major force in shaping the course of politics around the world. Since then we have experienced, in addition to the examples of “people power mentioned above, the people’s defiance campaign for civilian government in Thailand in 1992, the nonviolent independence struggles of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the brave uprising in Burma in 1988 and the courageous demonstrations in China in 1989

— the last two with many lives lost and without immediate success, though both now continue under new circumstances.

Looking back a little further, since 1970 politically significant nonviolent action has also occurred in at least the following countries: Australia, Japan, South Korea, India, Pakistan, Sudan, South Africa, Morocco, Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, Iran, Mexico, New Caledonia, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, the United States, West Germany, Norway, France, Algeria, Nigeria, Madagascar, Armenia, Moldova, the Ukraine, Georgia, the Philippines, Panama, Yugoslavia, Bolivia, Haiti, Ireland and Nicaragua.

Clearly, some of the recent and current cases have not yet succeeded while others have produced dramatic changes, even toppling powerful established governments, such as those of the Shah of Iran and Marcos of the Philippines. It should be cautioned, however, that without careful attention to the transition to a democratic or more just system, a new dictatorship can arise from the ruins of the old one.

The lifeblood of dictatorships — submission — can be cut off by the power derived from the ability of people and their independent institutions to organize despite governmental prohibitions to meet their human, social, economic and political needs and, when necessary, to resist and fight aggressors, dictators and oppressors. Nonviolent struggle is not weak, but strong. It is not the way of the timid, but of the brave. Nonviolent action is “armed struggle” in which people wield nonviolent weapons which, when refined and prepared, can be more powerful than violence for the causes of justice, freedom and peace.

Long-term consequences of nonviolent struggle

In place of passive submission to oppression, therefore, or reliance on social reformers and revolutionaries to gain control of the state apparatus to change oppressive social systems, another course is possible. Through the dual skills of wielding power by nonviolent struggle and a constructive programme of building more just and democratically controlled institutions, people will be able to bring a more just social order into being incrementally. People will become increasingly empowered to confront the forces of domination and to dissolve them, as they conduct constructive efforts to build on a less centralized basis a more free and just society.⁴

The recent and widespread use of nonviolent struggle is certain to have profound and continuing consequences in all political systems. The depth of those long-term results will vary with the degree to which this technique is used strategically wisely. Whole populations have learned that even in face of tyrannical governments, terroristic regimes and oppressive social systems they are not helpless. People can see they have an immense power potential which, with difficulties and costs, they can mobilize actively to shape their own futures and remove or block the forces of domination. Such knowledge once gained cannot be easily erased.

Whether nonviolent struggle can truly be a major factor in resolving those political and ethical problems depends in large degree on its actual capacities and future potential in refined and developed forms. If the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle against ruthless regimes can be clearly established, then our future may not only be one of immense difficulties, but also of unprecedented grounds for realistic hope for humanity. That possibility brings very great responsibilities to all people who would seek a better society and a peaceful world, one in which the goals of

justice, freedom and peace are coupled with realistic strategies to achieve and maintain them.

Nonviolent struggle for defence?

While constantly pursuing a variety of measures to make political freedom fuller and more vibrant in face of the forces of centralized manipulation, control and repression, new programmes are required. The aims of these are both to block the rise of dictatorships, as through defence against coups d'état, and also to disintegrate existing dictatorships. For both objectives the widespread application of political non-cooperation and popular defiance will be essential.⁵

Nonviolent struggle can also be applied for national defence against both coups d'état and foreign aggression. On the basis of research, feasibility studies, contingency planning, preparations and training of the population and leadership groups, a policy of "civilian-based defence" would seek to deter and defend by reliance on massive public defiance and widespread non-cooperation. The aim would be both to deny the attackers their objectives and also to make impossible the consolidation of their rule. This non-cooperation and defiance may be combined with other forms of action intended to subvert the loyalty and reliability of the attackers' troops and functionaries.

Writings on civilian-based defence were used by defence planners during the 1991 crises in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to protect themselves against Soviet attacks. These countries are now in the process of incorporating some type of modest civilian-based resistance components alongside their limited military capacities. Sweden also has a non-military resistance component within its total defence policy. Several other European countries have conducted some type of investigation or feasibility studies on the potential of this policy.⁶ Interest also exists in Thailand in the potential of a specifically anti-coup defence capacity.

Official adoption of a civilian-based defence policy would usually be a phased incremental introduction and gradual expansion of the civilian-based capacity, with many countries probably maintaining both military and civilian means for the foreseeable future. As with the adoption of nonviolent action in struggles for social justice and freedom, the refinement and adoption of civilian-based defence would contribute to the progressive replacement of reliance on violence with application of prepared nonviolent forms of struggle.

Christian responses to this option

The development of practical and effective nonviolent means of waging conflicts against injustice, dictatorship and aggression produces a new situation for those concerned to apply religious principles in the real and imperfect world in which we live. One of the major problems in political ethics and moral theology is rooted in the use of violence for political objectives.

The recognition, refinement and increasing effectiveness of nonviolent struggle could also potentially contribute to a more satisfactory resolution of the key problem of how to wield power effectively in the real world, so as to be able to influence the actual course of events, while not becoming enmeshed in the constant cycle of violence, thus violating important ethical, moral or religious principles and ideals. The contention here is that effective means of struggle can be both nonviolent and effective, both moral and practical.

One of the criteria for a "justified war" (*jus ad bellum*) is that it is the means of last resort, that all other "peaceful" options have been tried and have failed to produce the needed result. Such reliance on violence as the ultimate sanction is based on an assessment or assumption that it is the strongest and most effective means available to counter an attack, that the use of only weaker means or submission without any resistance would ensure that the opponents' violence would be successful in achieving its objectives. Such weakness and submission have been deemed to have their own problems, including moral ones.

However, the view that counter-violence is the strongest and most effective means available is not a judgment based on ethics, morality, norms, precepts or scriptures. It is an assumption about social and political reality. Therefore, it needs to be asked whether it is in fact true that counter-violence is the strongest and most effective means available to resist injustice, destroy an oppressive system, or counteract a violent attack.

Which are in fact the most powerful "means of last resort" is now an empirical question. To answer it requires data, analysis and evaluation of the relative effectiveness of violent versus nonviolent means of conducting conflicts. It requires examination of the two main means of waging struggles (as distinct from such milder measures as conciliation, negotiation and the like). The data required would come primarily from social, political and historical sources.

It is not true that violence is without question the most effective and powerful means of conducting open acute conflicts, especially for the goals of justice, freedom and peace. On the contrary, nonviolent struggle has often proved more effective than violent struggle. Furthermore, nonviolent struggle has been improvised on many occasions in struggles for justice, freedom and even for national defence purposes instead of war.

Where nonviolent struggle is for pragmatic reasons accepted for use in situations in which otherwise violence would have been applied, the moral situation is changed fundamentally. A variety of secondary moral or ethical problems would predictably arise or continue in the application of the nonviolent option. For example, under what conditions are extreme psychological pressures justified? When should international economic sanctions be applied? However, the most serious moral or ethical problems in the past have been aggravated because they have been associated with the use of violence in acute conflicts. It was at least in part to deal with these problems that the theories of justified war were developed — both *jus ad bellum* (under what conditions is resort to war justified?) and *jus in bello* (if it is justified, within what limits should it be conducted?).

However, the increase in the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle and its deliberate adoption in policies to deal with acute conflicts produces a new situation, in which one of the major conditions for a "justified war" (*jus ad bellum*) — that there is no available effective alternative to violence — no longer exists.

The development of pragmatic nonviolent struggle as a third practical but at the same time more moral option is a possibility which was not contemplated in the centuries-old arguments between exponents of pacifism and of "justified war". This option means that what is religiously and morally required and what is practically required become essentially the same. The distinction between the ideal and the real can be removed. The development of this option would follow the lines of another

insight, that the development of nonviolent struggle as a pragmatic option makes it possible for a society of people who do not believe in principled nonviolence nevertheless to accept nonviolent policies and courses of action.

Therefore, the old arguments between pacifists and exponents of justified wars can now be bypassed. Instead, attention, resources and thought can now be concentrated on development, critical examination and implementation of a type of struggle which appears to be a higher synthesis of the better components of each of those past positions. This higher synthesis then becomes one which may make possible a new integration between ethics and politics, by providing a way to face crises with behaviour which is simultaneously in harmony with religious injunctions not to kill and politically responsible because of its capacity successfully to resist hostile forces attempting to impose or maintain injustice, dictatorship or war.

Christian non-pacifist voices

Recognizing that nonviolent struggle raises important policy and theological issues quite separate from the arguments for and against pacifism, several prominent Christian calls have been made for exploring the potential of nonviolent struggle in acute internal and international conflicts. These have come from both Catholics and Protestants, and date back to at least the 1930s.

Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in his famous book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, recognized the inevitability of conflict in society and therefore the need for coercion. If that coercion is not to be by violence, he argued, one must "choose those types of coercion which are most compatible with, and least dangerous to, the rational and moral forces of society."⁷ "Nonviolent coercion and resistance... is the type of coercion which offers the largest opportunities for a harmonious relationship with the moral and rational factors in social life."⁸ The advantages of nonviolent methods are great, he argued, but they "must be pragmatically considered in the light of circumstances". He understood that this technique was not yet adequately developed and concluded that "there is no problem of political life to which religious imagination can make a larger contribution than this problem of developing nonviolent resistance".⁹

A brief but very important Catholic statement came in 1986 from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation". In the context of a discussion of the need for "a very rigorous analysis of the situation" where "armed struggle" is considered "as a last resort to put an end to an obvious and prolonged tyranny", it declared:

Indeed, because of the continual development of the technology of violence and the increasingly serious dangers implied in its recourse, that which today is termed "passive resistance" shows a way more conformable to moral principles and having no less prospects for success.¹⁰

In the foundation document attached to their 1986 pastoral letter "In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace", the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church encouraged "special study of nonviolent defence and peacemaking forces", citing "a vast — but neglected — history" of nonviolent defiance against "foreign conquerors, domestic tyrants, oppressive systems, internal usurpers and economic masters".

Among notable modern examples are Gandhi's satyagraha (soul force) in India, Norway's resistance during Nazi occupation to keep schools free of fascist control, Martin Luther King Jr's civil rights movement and Solidarity in Poland... Every prospect that either military establishments or revolutionary movements might effectively replace armed force with nonviolent methods deserves Christian support.¹¹

The 1987 report of the Episcopal diocese of Washington on nuclear weapons also noted the topic of nonviolent resistance for defence, but treated the topic with considerable scepticism:

We also recognize as legitimate the perspective of nonviolent resistance, and accept it as a personal option and as a possible collective approach to conflict resolution... We are honestly troubled, however, by the claim that nonviolent resistance can be effective in settling conflicts between nations. Most of us have difficulty seeing how it meets the responsibility to protect the innocent from oppression's spread, or to prevent suffering, although we understand it as a valid means of resisting internal oppression and injustice. Nonviolent resistance was indeed successfully used as a means to achieve human and civil rights in the United States during the 1960s.¹²

The general assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) also addressed the policy of civilian-based defence as an alternative to nuclear deterrence in its 1988 policy statement about Christian responsibilities in the nuclear age:

A strategy of civilian-based defence, grounded in nonviolent resistance, is now a matter of serious study at several major universities. Civilian-based defence involves work stoppages, strikes, slow-downs, boycotts, demonstrations, disabling key components of the infrastructures and other nonviolent means as ways of refusing to consent to be governed by an invading power. There is risk of failure in such an alternative, as there has always been in conventional military defence. For civilian-based defence to have a chance of success would require a degree of national consensus, discipline and devotion which we do not believe exists in this country at the present time. We do believe, however, that the church needs to give careful study to the growing literature in this field.¹³

Assessments by the World Council of Churches

In the years since its founding after the second world war, various bodies of the World Council of Churches have discussed the potential relevance of nonviolent action in facing both international conflicts and struggles for social justice. These statements have varied in their terminology and the clarity of their references to nonviolent action as a technique used by diverse groups, to moral or religious nonviolence, or to various peaceful means of conflict resolution.¹⁴ Nevertheless, some of those statements have unmistakably discussed nonviolent action as a technique of action sometimes applied by groups which do not share a religious conviction regarding nonviolence, which is the focus of central interest here.

The "Martin Luther King Jr Resolution" adopted by the WCC's fourth assembly (Uppsala 1968) directed the central committee "to explore means by which the World Council could promote studies on nonviolent methods of achieving social change".¹⁵ In 1971 the central committee, meeting in Addis Ababa, asked the sub-unit on Church and Society "to conduct a two-year study on the problems and potentialities of violence and nonviolence in the struggle for social justice". The committee had received a report from an ad hoc staff group which had spoken of an "increasing

reluctance to pose the issue as 'violence' versus 'non-violence'", preferring "a search for more pertinent Christian criteria for evaluating alternative coercive strategies".¹⁶

In 1972 Church and Society organized a consultation on "Violence and Non-violence in Social Change" in Cardiff, Wales; and its report was commended to the churches by the central committee in August 1973 for study, comment and action.¹⁷ The report dealt extensively with how Christians could effectively oppose the forces of an oppressive society, and contained significant passages on the relevance of nonviolent action. These included the following:

The world and the churches have been both inspired and challenged in recent years by examples of new and sophisticated nonviolent movements for justice and freedom. Some of these — for example the Gandhian movement — have been non-Christian. Others — such as that of Martin Luther King — have been Christian. Together their witness has brought the churches of the world to examine anew the style of their involvement in the struggle for world justice and peace.¹⁸

Later, it continued:

We are convinced that far too little attention has been given by the church and by resistance movements to the methods and techniques of nonviolence 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. Nonviolent action represents relatively unexplored territory: initiatives being taken by various groups and individuals to help the exploration happen deserve the strongest possible support from the WCC and the churches.

The report then pointed to some complexities in the application of nonviolent forms of struggle:

We reject, however, some facile assumptions about nonviolence which have been current in the recent debate. Nonviolent action is highly political. It may be extremely controversial. It is not free of the compromise and ambiguity which accompany any attempt to embody a love-based ethic in a world of power and counter-power, and it is not necessarily bloodless. Moreover, most struggles for freedom — and most government actions — have been, as a matter of fact, mixtures of violent and nonviolent action... In all of these Christians will have hard choices to make. The more these choices are informed by a responsible spirit and knowledge of constructive nonviolent options, the more creative they will be.

The report also sought to dispel some oversimplifications concerning both violent and nonviolent means: "Violence should not be equated with radicalism and revolution, nor nonviolence with gradualism and reform, nor vice versa." It concluded with a series of questions which exponents of the differing convictions about the use of violent and nonviolent means should ask themselves.¹⁹

In acting on the Cardiff statement, the central committee called attention to specific topics:

We welcome the statement's clarification of the nature of nonviolent action... Nonviolence must not be equated with mere passivity or disengagement in the face of injustice. On the contrary, understood in the tradition of Gandhi, King and Luthuli, it is an active, highly political, often controversial and sometimes very dangerous form of engagement in social conflict.

It went on to recommend

that WCC units and sub-units be encouraged to develop fresh initiatives appropriate to their respective programmes, to stimulate and assist churches and Christians throughout the world to more careful study of, and more courageous engagement in, nonviolent action in support of the oppressed.²⁰

The WCC's fifth assembly (Nairobi 1975) adopted a policy guideline on "the need... to explore further the significance of nonviolent action for social change and the struggle against militarism".²¹

In 1979 the central committee encouraged "further exploration and continuing implementation of the report on 'Violence, Nonviolence and the Struggle for Social Justice', paying serious attention to the rights of conscientious objectors and the need to promote peaceful resolution of conflicts". The same year the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) convened a small consultation in Chambséy, Switzerland, on peaceful resolution of conflict with representatives of the Historic Peace Churches, scholars and activists seeking viable alternatives to military-dominated systems of national defence.

In 1980 the executive and central committees called on WCC member churches "to initiate and encourage innovative measures for peaceful resolutions of conflicts". Ecumenical thinking was reported to have "moved more and more in the direction of the need for justice as a means of avoiding and resolving conflicts, to eliminate the root causes of war to be found in economic injustice, oppression and exploitation and... restrictions on human rights", as the central committee stated at its meeting in Dresden in 1981.

In preparation for the sixth assembly (Vancouver 1983) an informal international consultation on "Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict" was held in Northern Ireland, co-sponsored by the Corrymeela Community and the WCC, in March 1983. Its report submitted to the WCC general secretary, commented that "the level of the current debate about violence and nonviolence in civil conflicts does not match the complexity of the international situation today and the actual experience of people regarding the use of violence for political ends... This complexity makes it even more difficult today to draw up general guidelines for a Christian response in particular situations of violence."

The "traditional questions must be reopened", the report continued, including the criteria for the legitimacy of governmental power and the individual right of resistance (including by violence) against "unjust structures". "This applies also to the role of violence and nonviolence in social change." The question was raised whether the criteria of Christian just war theories could simply be applied to civil conflicts:

The report of 1973 employed both pacifism and just war theory. Since then, both traditional positions have felt their inadequacies in the debate on militarism, modern sophisticated means of mass destruction and revolutionary conflicts. The time seems ripe for a new attempt at bridge-building between them.²²

The report urged strengthening of international institutions to assist resolution of both local and international conflicts, but contained no specific recommendations for the examination of the potential of nonviolent action in social and international conflicts.

The WCC's seventh assembly (Canberra 1991) had in mind especially the conflicts which had followed the collapse of the communist systems in Eastern and Central Europe when it referred to the "complex intertwined set of issues" arising "at once virtually all around the globe".

It is not surprising, therefore, that no clear definitions of either the problems or of possible solutions are at hand, or that our own grasp of applicable moral, ethical and theological categories is inadequate.

The central committee, meeting in August 1992, agreed "that active nonviolent action be affirmed as a clear emphasis in the programmes and projects related to conflict resolution..."²³ WCC general secretary Emilio Castro pointed out that

the two issues at stake belong together: an overall estimation of the potentialities of active nonviolence in the world today; and the actual handling of conflict situations, which still has to be discussed more fully. We are not saying — and the Council has never been able to say — that war is not permitted in any circumstances. We are saying that lessons learned in nonviolent approaches can help us in such a situation.²⁴

At its 1994 meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, the WCC central committee recommended the establishment of a Programme to Overcome Violence, whose purpose was to challenge and transform the global culture of violence in the direction of a culture of just peace.²⁵ In this connection a consultation was held in Corrymeela in June 1994 on "Building a Culture of Peace: The Churches' Contribution". WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser said in his opening address that "if one considers the resources and the energies invested in the education and preparation of young men for the task of fighting in wars, then it becomes obvious that the social competence in the nonviolent resolution of conflicts is gravely underdeveloped".²⁶

The Corrymeela consultation made no specific call for the consideration, development and promotion of nonviolent action and nonviolent means of struggle in social conflicts and for defence. Later that month, the board of CCIA, meeting in Kitwe, Zambia, focused on "building and rebuilding communities of justice, peace and ecological sustainability". It accepted conflict as a "normal aspect of life in human community" and pointed out that conflict "does not necessarily lead to violence and war". Its programme sought among various other objectives "to contribute to the delegitimization of war and violence and to the promotion of peace with justice". Mediation work was among specific recommendations. Nothing more specific related to developing nonviolent action or its use as a substitute for violence was recommended.²⁷

Catholic bishops' statements

The Roman Catholic bishops of the United States in their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* stressed the importance of attention to nonviolent struggle, especially that applied for purposes of national defence. They indicated the potential of this approach for gaining the support both of adherents to just war theory and of pacifists. "We believe work to develop nonviolent means of fending off aggression and resolving conflict best reflects the call of Jesus both to love and to justice."²⁸ The bishops continued: "Nonviolent means of resistance to evil deserve much more study and consideration than they have thus far received.

There have been significant instances in which people have successfully resisted oppression without recourse to arms.”²⁹ In this connection they cited examples of nonviolent resistance by Danes and Norwegians during the second world war, and noted that nonviolent struggle can take many forms, depending on the situation, including for national defence:

There is, for instance, organized popular defence instituted by government as part of its contingency planning. Citizens would be trained in the techniques of peaceable non-compliance and non-cooperation as a means of hindering an invading force or non-democratic government from imposing its will.

Citing the requirements of effective nonviolent action, they concluded that, although it may not always succeed, “before the possibility is dismissed as impractical or unrealistic, we urge that it be measured against the almost certain effects of a major war”. Then, in a significant departure from the standard theological positions regarding justified war and pacifism, they noted:

Nonviolent resistance offers a common ground of agreement for those individuals who choose the option of Christian pacifism... and those who choose the option of lethal force allowed by the theology of just war. Nonviolent resistance makes clear that both are able to be committed to the same objective — defence of their country.³⁰

In conclusion, compared with the threats of existing military policies, “practical reason as well as spiritual faith” demand that nonviolent popular defence be given “serious consideration as an alternative course of action”.³¹

The Catholic bishops’ reflection, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the 1983 pastoral letter, was published in November 1993. In the intervening years significant new applications of nonviolent struggle had occurred, conducted almost entirely by people who did not believe in pacifism.

The Catholic bishops in 1993 raised again the two traditions of “nonviolence and just war” and also referred to both “the success of nonviolent methods in recent history” and the post-cold war pressures for limited military engagement and for humanitarian intervention. The statement referred to the diverse views within the Catholic Church on the validity of the use of “force” (meaning violence), stating that:

- 1) In situations of conflict our constant commitment ought to be, as far as possible, to strive for justice through nonviolent means.
- 2) But when sustained attempts at nonviolent action fail to protect the innocent against fundamental injustice, then legitimate political authorities are permitted as a last resort to employ limited force to rescue the innocent and establish justice.³²

The bishops’ new statement cited the “new importance” of “nonviolence” which should not be “confused with popular notions of non-resisting pacifism”. This “nonviolence” was not “simply a personal option or vocation, [and] recent history suggests that in some circumstances it can be an effective public undertaking as well”.³³

The bishops then quoted what Pope John Paul II had written about the Eastern European revolutions in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1993), on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*:

It seemed that the European order resulting from the second world war... could only be overturned by another war. Instead, it has been overcome by the nonviolent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth.³⁴

The bishops went on to say:

These nonviolent revolutions challenge us to find ways to take into full account the power of organized, active nonviolence. What is the real potential power of serious nonviolent strategies and tactics — and their limits? What are the ethical requirements when organized nonviolence fails to overcome evil and when totalitarian powers inflict massive injustice on an entire people? What are the responsibilities of and limits on the international community?

One must ask, in light of recent history, whether nonviolence should be restricted to personal commitments or whether it also should have a place in the public order with the tradition of justified and limited war. National leaders bear a moral obligation to see that nonviolent alternatives are seriously considered for dealing with conflicts. New styles of preventative diplomacy and conflict resolution ought to be explored, tried, improved and supported. Nations should promote research, education and training in nonviolent means of resisting evil. Nonviolent strategies need greater attention in international affairs.

Such obligations do not detract from a state's right and duty to defend against aggression as a last resort. They do, however, raise the threshold for the recourse to force [violence] by establishing institutions which promote nonviolent solutions of disputes and nurturing political commitment to such efforts. In some future conflicts, strikes and people power could be more effective than guns and bullets.³⁵

The statement reviewed the just war criterion of "last resort": that violence "may be used only after all peaceful alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted". The section on the just war tradition ended with the recommendation that "important work needs to be done in refining, clarifying and applying the just-war tradition to the choices facing our decision-makers in this still violent and dangerous world".³⁶

The bishops also encouraged integration of "Catholic teaching on justice, non-violence and peace into the curriculum and broader life of our educational endeavours", observing that "we will not fashion new policies until we repudiate old thinking". They concluded:

Changes we could barely imagine ten years ago have taken place before our eyes. Without violence, the hope, courage and power of ordinary people have brought down walls, restored freedoms, toppled governments and changed the world.³⁷

In April 1994 the Mexican Catholic bishops addressed essentially this same issue in the context of domestic conditions in their country, including violence, poverty, injustices, mistreatment of ethnic groups and distrust of institutions. Despite the temptation to resort to violence against such grievances, the bishops rejected "violence as a way to resolve problems, for violence begets more violence". "We must absolutely reject all violence, whether verbal or physical." Rather, said the bishops, quoting the 1986 statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cited earlier, "that which today is termed passive resistance shows a way more conformable to moral principles and having no less prospects for success".³⁸

The ecumenical assemblies of Basel and Seoul

At the end of the 1980s two major international ecumenical gatherings on the themes of justice, peace and the environment were held, one in Europe in Basel, one at a global level in Seoul, Korea. The documents produced by these assemblies made clear references to nonviolent action, and the document from Seoul mentioned its application to national defence.³⁹

The European Ecumenical Assembly on Peace and Justice was convoked in Basel in May 1989 by the Roman Catholic bishops of Europe and the Conference of European Churches, and jointly presided over by Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Alexy of Leningrad (now patriarch of Moscow) and the Catholic archbishop of Milan, Cardinal C. M. Martini.

The final document, discussed and approved by the great majority of more than 500 delegates, includes several passages relevant to our theme, among them a commitment to "a nonviolent solution of conflicts from one end of the earth to the other".⁴⁰ In Section VI, "Fundamental Affirmations, Commitments, Recommendations and Perspectives for the Future", it states:

At all levels in the church and in the society, there ought to be developed a peace education oriented to peaceful resolution of conflicts. In every situation, the nonviolent alternative ought to have priority in the resolution of conflicts. Nonviolence ought to be seen as an active dynamic and a constructive force based on the absolute respect for the human person.⁴¹

Less than a year later, in March 1990, the WCC organized a world "convocation" on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in Seoul. Although the involvement of the Catholic Church was almost nil compared to Basel, and Orthodox participation very reserved, the meeting of 400 delegates and almost as many observers and guests was a very significant step in the involvement of the churches at a global level with these themes.⁴²

One of the affirmations voted at Seoul states: "We are called to seek every possible means of establishing justice, achieving peace and solving conflicts by active non-violence."⁴³ The security of nations and of peoples was the focus of one of the covenants, which developed that commitment with repeated references to the promotion of "forms of nonviolent defence" and to the "cultures of active nonviolence". One of these passages recommended "developing and coordinating justice and peace ministries including a global nonviolent service which can advance the struggle for human rights and liberation and serve in situations of conflict, crises and violence".⁴⁴ A later section on "the demilitarization of international relations and the promotion of nonviolent forms of defence" recommended that those purposes could be advanced "through a defensive, non-threatening and non-offensive posture or security measures and the development of civilian-based defence".⁴⁵ Yet another section of the document was headed: "For a culture of active nonviolence which is life-promoting and is not a withdrawal from situations of violence and oppression but is a way to work for justice and liberation."⁴⁶

The need for fresh political and theological consideration

It is evident that a diverse range of prominent Christian leaders, denominations, churches, ecumenical assemblies and other authoritative bodies have, in varying

degrees of precision, pointed to nonviolent struggle and even specifically civilian-based defence as meriting serious exploration and practice in acute conflicts in which violence otherwise would likely be used. These thinkers and groups have done so after considering both morality and efficacy.

These statements add significant weight to the call made earlier in this article for both careful consideration of the practical potential of nonviolent struggle for liberation and defence, and also for fresh theological examination of the possibilities of moving beyond the old pacifist and justified war positions and arguments. Sound new political and theological positions may now be possible.

It now remains to be seen to what extent and how Christians — and also religious and secular leaders who respect Christian thinking — will act upon the important counsels offered in these important challenges.

NOTES

¹ For a fuller study of the nature of nonviolent struggle, see Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

² See Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century*, Westport, CT, and London, Praeger, 1994.

³ F. R. Cowell, *The Revolutions of Ancient Rome*, tr. W.P. Dickson, London, Thames and Hudson, rev. ed. 1962, pp.42-43. Cowell's account is based on Livy.

⁴ See Gene Sharp, "Popular Empowerment" and "The Problem of Political Technique in Radical Politics", in *Social Power and Political Freedom*, Boston, Porter Sargent, 1980, pp.309-48 and pp.181-94.

⁵ See Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins, "Against the Coup: A Guide to Effective Action to Prevent and Defeat Coups d'Etat", Occasional Paper No. 2, New York, International League for Human Rights, 1994; and "From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation", Cambridge, Albert Einstein Institution, 1994, and (in English and Burmese) Bangkok, Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma, 1994.

⁶ See Gene Sharp, with Bruce Jenkins, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System*, Princeton, NJ, and London, Princeton UP, 1990.

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, London, SCM Press, 1937, p.238.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.250f.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.254.

¹⁰ "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation", section 79, published in *Origins: NC Documentary Service*, Vol. 15, no. 44, 17 April 1986, Washington, D.C., Catholic News Service, 1986. The Congregation's earlier "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" (1984) had condemned violence ("To put one's trust in violent means in the hope of restoring more justice is to become the victim of a fatal illusion: Violence begets violence and degrades man... The overthrow by means of revolutionary violence of structures which generate violence is not ipso facto the beginning of a just regime" — adding that "we are not talking here about abandoning an effective means of struggle on behalf of the poor for an ideal which has no practical effects."). However, it did not explicitly point to nonviolent struggle as an alternative to violence in struggles for greater justice. In *Origins*, Vol. 14, no. 13, 13 Sept. 1984, sections 7, 10, 11. I am grateful to Thomas Quigley for these two references.

¹¹ Council of Bishops, *In Defense Of Creation — The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace: Foundation Document*, Nashville, Graded Press, 1986, p.80. I am grateful to John McCartney for information on the United Methodist Church.

¹² *The Nuclear Dilemma: A Christian Search for Understanding. A Report of the Committee of Inquiry on the Nuclear Issue*, Cincinnati, Forward Movement Publications, 1987, p.109.

¹³ *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age: A Policy Statement Adopted by the 200th General Assembly*, Louisville, Office of the General Assembly, PC (USA), 1988, p.7.

- ¹⁴ The difficulties here have been compounded by a general lack of terminological clarity; in fact, the central committee of the WCC in 1971 spoke of "the semantic confusion which surrounds words like 'violence', 'revolution', 'power' and 'liberation'" and pointed to the need for terminological clarification to facilitate future discussions (*Minutes*, Geneva, WCC, 1971, Appendix VIII, p.246). The central committee in August 1973 also pointed to the conceptual problem of an enlarged concept of violence in its statement "Violence, Nonviolence and the Struggle for Social Justice", reprinted in *Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict*, Geneva, WCC, 1983, p.18 n.2.
- ¹⁵ Norman Goodall, ed., *The Uppsala Report 1968*, Geneva, WCC, 1968, p.270.
- ¹⁶ Cf. *Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict*, p.16; *Minutes* of the Addis Ababa central committee meeting, Appendix VIII, p.246.
- ¹⁷ Published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 1973; cited here from *Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.21.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.28-32.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.19.
- ²¹ A survey of these developments is found in a report prepared by the WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), submitted to the Committee on Programme Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation) at the meeting of the WCC central committee in Johannesburg, South Africa, January 1994 (Document C.11, dupl.).
- ²² "Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict: The Report of the Corrymeela Consultation", in *Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict*, pp.9-15.
- ²³ Cf. "Overcoming the Spirit, Logic and Practice of War", in *Programme to Overcome Violence: An Introduction*, Geneva, WCC, Programme Unit III, 1995, p.7.
- ²⁴ *Minutes* of the 1992 central committee meeting, Geneva, WCC, 1992, p.95.
- ²⁵ *Programme to Overcome Violence*, p.17.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.94-98.
- ²⁸ *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response: A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace*, Washington, D.C., US Catholic Conference, 1983, p.25.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.70.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p.71.
- ³² US Catholic Bishops, "The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace", in *Origins*, Vol. 23, no. 26, 9 Dec. 1993, p.453.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.453f.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.454.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.454f.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.463f.
- ³⁸ Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, *Por la Justicia, La Reconciliación y la Paz en México*, Cuautitlán Iacalli, Mexico, Mexican Bishops Conference, 1994, paras 28, 35; English translation by Thomas Quigley in *Origins*, 1994, Vol. 24, No. 3.
- ³⁹ I am grateful to Guido Mocellin of *Il Regno attualità* for recommending inclusion of passages from these important ecumenical assemblies, and to Sr Mary Litell OSF and Stephen Coady for help in connection with their documentation.
- ⁴⁰ *Peace With Justice: The Official Documentation of the European Ecumenical Assembly*, Geneva, Conference of European Churches, 1989, p.54.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.60; see also pp.31, 42, 46, 50, 95, 97, 127, 129.
- ⁴² The final document of the Seoul convocation consists of three parts: a preamble, ten affirmations about justice, peace and integrity of creation, and a covenant in four areas related to economics, militarism, climate change and racism. Only the affirmations were fully discussed and voted on by the participants.
- ⁴³ *Now is the Time: The Final Document and Other Texts from the World Convocation on JPIC*, Geneva, WCC, 1990, p.17. This was in Affirmation VI: "We affirm the peace of Jesus Christ."
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.28.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.28-29.

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