

REVIEW of

Mokgethi Motlhabi - *Challenge to Apartheid: towards a moral national resistance* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988).

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Mokgethi Motlhabi is currently director of the Educational Opportunities Council based in Johannesburg. With the assistance of the present Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, he attended the Chicago Theological Seminary and this study is informed by the PhD research he subsequently undertook at Boston University under, amongst others, Walter G Muelder, whose influence on him is paramount. *The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance to Apartheid: a social-ethical analysis* was published by Skotaville in 1984. *Challenge to Apartheid* is essentially an update that takes into account more recent developments, the 1984-86 uprising, and the formation of the National Forum, AZAPO, and the UDF.

Motlhabi's emphasis first falls on the compatibility of the theoretical approach of various anti-apartheid organisations with their practice. This is followed by an assessment of the extent to which these movements have conformed to certain moral laws in order to chart the direction for further advances. Motlhabi's key question is whether there still is room for non-violent resistance in South Africa. His significance lies in the importance of evaluating the Christian contribution to that resistance.

He outlines the history of the ANC's 1952 Defiance Campaign, the PAC's 1960 Positive Action Campaign and the 1974 BCM Viva FRELIMO Rally. By differentiating between long-term and short-term goals, Motlhabi subjects these campaigns to critical analysis. The ANC is criticised for emphasizing short-term goals to the detriment of long-term ones by failing to address the problem of how the main pillars of apartheid could be undermined. The PAC is accused of lacking realistic short-term goals aimed at the strategic destruction of apartheid at the expense of an overriding obsession with its totality. The BCM is faulted for failing to link short-term goals to long-term goals -for how is the development of black consciousness linked to effecting wider social transformation?

Although it is recognised that the alliances of the 1980s (AZAPO/National Forum and UDF) have operated within tighter constraints, they are subjected to similar criticism. Motlhabi states that whilst they have kept the spirit of resistance alive, 'little effort has been made to learn from the past and improve upon it' (p116). AZAPO is singled out as an organisation with a unitary policy, but Motlhabi argues that AZAPO's long-term requirements remain unattended. The practices of the NF and the UDF are seen to trail behind their theories. They are essentially defensive alliances, failing to build a meaningful 'politics of aggression' or 'challenge'.

Altogether it is made clear that previous strategies of resistance have failed because actions have fallen short of aims. Motlhabi believes that such problems could be resolved if moral laws are taken into consideration. 'Both formulation and implementation of strategy must take morality into account, while morality must, in turn, inspire and inform all meaningful strategy for action' (pp5-6). Moved by the need to develop a viable Christian perspective, Motlhabi draws extensively from Muellder's *Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics*. Motlhabi sees in Muellder's list of 15 universal moral laws the basis for elaborating practical guidelines for moral decision and thus judging the value of competing strategies. Accordingly, in proceeding to assess the various movements in terms of these laws, it is argued that greater reflection and analysis in accordance with them could have led to advances.

Drawing out a morally correct way forward, Motlhabi explores the space that remains for non-violent alternatives. In discussing new methods that may be tried, his main focus falls on two strategies: 1) direct Christian action undertaken by the churches and organised Christians and; 2) intensified non-cooperation with the state. In the former case, such grassroots approaches as critical sermons and 'Crusades' on a national scale with the carrying of Bibles and crosses are highlighted. In the latter case, Motlhabi emphasizes the need for black leadership and the strengthening of grassroots organisations. He concludes that 'with some reorganization in structure, strategy, and leadership in the South African struggle, it may still be possible for blacks working internally for change to press for a peaceful solution to their problems' (p206).

There can be no doubt that strategies require greater reflection and analysis but there are a number of difficulties to be raised with Motlhabi's position, in particular over the application and status of moral laws and over his understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. He fails to address the question of the moral position of those who hold political power for one thing. Secondly, the status of Muellder's fifteen universal moral laws is questionable. Why should we accept them? Motlhabi's interpretation of the relationship between theory and practice

is limited to focussing on aims in terms of the internal contradictions between long-term and short-term goals. Wider epistemological questions are not addressed and the dialectical relationship between human actions and social structures is side-stepped.

Motlhabi assumes that structures are not all-determining but never makes clear just what the space for action is. To what extent do social structures determine actions? The lack of precision here is not surprising for this is one of the central problems in social theory. What is surprising is that Motlhabi fails to engage in any analysis of class forces or the state, fails to ask questions around the relative importance of organisational factors in assessing social movements and fails to evaluate the issue of spontaneity of protest (crucial in understanding the 1984-86 period in South Africa). On his own terms, discussions of the recent period are inadequate. For instance, he makes little reference to existing groups that are organised in the churches such as the Young Christian Society, the Catholic Student Association and the South African Council of Churches and their working relationship with the broader democratic movement.

Motlhabi argues that he is not committed to non-violence exclusively, but under what conditions he evaluates non-violence as successful or unsuccessful is unclear. Over thirty years ago, Leo Kuper wrote that 'it is a crucial issue in Africa whether Mau Mau or other forms of violence pay better than passive resistance' (*Passive Resistance in South Africa*, p94). Motlhabi never answers Kuper's question nor does he try to evaluate adequately the actual efforts at armed struggle by the ANC or the PAC. The problem stands: to what extent are various forms of protest structurally precluded?