

A National Service Drama around Conscientious Objection to Military Conscription as Experienced by a Seminarian at the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch.

Jacobus W. van der Riet

The following account is based on reminiscences dating back to the period 1986 to 1991, and so at the outset I must warn that after so many years the chronology of events and memories of those events are at best sketchy and confused. I only have vague recollections from that time, as I have a rather weak and selective memory.

I obtained leave to do Alternative National Service as a conscientious objector on universal pacifist grounds, which meant one had to do work in a state institution or government office for a period three times longer than military service. Because military service lasted two years in those days, it meant I was supposed to do six years of service on a soldier's pay scale. Eventually I only did three years (because the length of military service was halved to one year) from early 1988 to early 1991.

When I was first called or, shall we say, conscripted, to do National Service in 1978 as an Infantryman in Kimberley I actually quite looked forward to the idea, but I then experienced what was known as a "call to the ministry", much against my own inclination, and enrolled in the University of Stellenbosch instead. Whether I would have enjoyed military training in Kimberley is a moot question, and the question deepens when one considers what would awaited me after that training. But anyhow it was not to be. In any case I was a reluctant student for the ministry, if not a non-diligent one. It must be pointed out that I suffered from an obsessive-compulsive conscience at the time, which made life somewhat of a nightmare.

I had been politically aware since school days and had never been a supporter of the then ruling party, and I suppose this antipathy increased during the years of study. After a break in studies between 1982 and 1983 to work as an illustrator for a missionary organization in Zimbabwe, I returned to theological studies in 1984. During the time in Zimbabwe I became aware, if I remember correctly, of the nefarious role played by the then SADF in fostering the civil war in Mozambique that was to cost a million lives, a role they inherited from the old Rhodesian Army at the behest of the CIA.

By 1986 or certainly 1987 I became aware of an impending call-up crisis as a military chaplain to the SADF. I could hardly see myself blessing the then government's military operations in neighbouring countries or the violent suppression of internal dissent. In retrospect I guess I would have spent my two years in Detention Barracks rather than the military parade ground. It would have been a disaster for both parties concerned, for I would have spoken my little mind much to everyone's displeasure.

Two of my original classmates from the class of 1978 had already experienced a crisis of conscience and had already opted to apply for the above-mentioned exemption on pacifist grounds. They were Bobby Nel and Neels Theron. Bobby found employment in the Tygerberg Hospital as a chaplain and Neels in the Cape Town City Library. So I also started to do chaplain work during summer breaks in the Groote Schuur Hospital as a possible preparation for a similar course of action.

But first I needed to be persuaded of the rectitude or defensibility of the pacifist position, as my rather sensitive conscience would be strained by professing a lie. So I read many a book, especially

the works of a Mennonite author like Yoder, and many a history of pacifist heroes. The two friends mentioned above had also studied these works. At some point an uncle who was a lawyer and assessor in the courts became aware of my intentions or possible course of action and started to write me long letters to dissuade me and to argue against the pacifist position. Of course, he had valid points which were difficult to argue against, and perhaps I was not sufficiently open to be persuaded. Could it have been pride that made me persist in my line of thinking? But even if my uncle's arguments against pacifism were successful, it would merely have left me to consider the next option, i.e. a straightforward political refusal which would have meant a term in jail. I was not totally averse to that idea, but did not really wish to subject my much-suffering mother to that particular form of stress, she having had to cope with quite a bit of stress already because of earlier brushes with authority, about matters political. A psychoanalyst might perhaps see in all of this an attempt at self-destruction, because of a still lingering doubt about ministry in the Dutch Reformed Church. I still think someone like Charles Bester who went to jail on purely political grounds, inspired by his Christian beliefs, is perhaps the only real hero in this saga. I think there were other such people too. Bester had a difficult time in prison, I believe.

I remember seeing the film "The Mission" at the time, which more or less clinched the matter for me on a subjective level. I identified with the priest tied to the cross as he majestically went over the edge of the waterfall rather than the brother who decided to take up arms against the aggressors. I sort of died in my cinema seat along with him, and was persuaded of the truth of the pacifist position.

At some stage the SADF's chaplain general became aware of my intended course of action, to apply for exemption, and I was eventually presented with a compromise proposal, viz. to serve at Derdepoort TB Hospital on the Botswana border as a chaplain. I.e. I could avoid the SADF's battlefields and work in hospital as a chaplain as I had been doing in Groote Schuur Hospital. I asked whether I would be allowed to work in civilian clothes and not in uniform, as I felt that the uniform would be an insurmountable barrier between myself and the black patients. Perhaps I was wrong in this estimation, and who knows, maybe the patients would not have minded the uniform. Nevertheless, when the request to be allowed to work in civilian clothes was turned down, I also declined the generous offer. Was this unnecessary stubbornness on my part?

Throughout all these deliberations, I was acutely aware of the pitfalls of any course of action one might adopt. By serving in the SADF I might become an accomplice to unspeakable horrors, but by refusing to serve I might also be abandoning conscripts in need, who might have to enter battle or the afterlife without the comfort of prayer. It seemed to me that there was no course of action that was beyond reproach, and I was even aware of the possibility that my action might ultimately be seen as selfish or simply stubborn pigheadedness. Finally I had a short conversation with the late Dr Beyers Naudé at his sister's residence in Stellenbosch in which I put forward my concerns to him. He encouraged me to follow the path of asking for exemption, and I decided to follow his advice and live with the consequences of the decision, however gray the matter was in moral terms. For him it was clearly less gray than for me.

So I wrote the necessary letters to the relevant Board for Conscientious Objection, and unlike my two forerunners whose letters were accepted without having to explain themselves before the Board, I was summoned to appear before the Board in Bloemfontein. I took a flight to that

venerable bastion of justice, but the plane had to land at Kimberley because of flooding, and I had visions of being transported in a SADF helicopter to the safety of the Free State capital. But somehow I was spared that ironical twist of events and found myself in that city after a delay. Another objector, Ds. Potgieter of the Heidedal DRC Mission, housed me and took me to the Board, I guess. I don't remember details. I was impressed by the young men of the Jehova's Witness heresy who sat like lambs awaiting slaughter before the room where we were called to appear. I was rather combative for a pacifist in front of the Board, arguing rather forcefully for non-violent approaches to the Border War. The Board must have thought me a certifiable lunatic. A distant relative also sat amongst the panel of judges who had to determine the sincerity of my convictions. At any rate, after a week or two I received a letter to say the exemption was granted and that I had to arrange with an institution of my choice to do the alternative national service. The Department of Labour was ultimately responsible and would have to approve the arrangement. I should have asked to go and work on Gough or Marion Island or as a deckhand on the SA Agulhas, but alas, I did not think of that possibility.

The NGSK of the time, the present VGK, was happy to have me work for them as chaplain in Groote Schuur and so was the chaplaincy service there. It turned out that there were also other conscientious objectors already working there and later more were added, all from English backgrounds. One of them in fact was accidentally unmasked by three of us as a MK operative who planted bombs at bus stops on behalf of his masters in Lusaka, which was a little odd for a professed pacifist, and after a sleepless night upon the discovery, I confronted the chaplain concerned and extracted a promise from him that no further bombs would be detonated, and so no further bombs exploded in Cape Town. But of course, I lived in terror for three years that they would and that the chaplains would have to face the victims of such blasts.

There was an organisation called COSG (Conscientious Objectors Support Group) which met once in a while in Cape Town. Most objectors seemed quite cheerful and were excellent young men, but I am aware of at least one person who suffered from severe depression. The COSG chairman in Cape Town would report at these meetings about his endless deliberations with the Department of Labour about Service conditions. It was very boring to listen to, but I guess it gave him a sense of purpose. Once I travelled with them to a wider conference in Port Elizabeth, but I remember nothing about the discussions.

At no time did I suffer social opprobrium or ostracism because of my decision. Stellenbosch society was too polite for that. What was said behind my back, of course, I don't know and I didn't really care. When I wrote my final examinations at this seminary I was informed that I would not be eligible for ordination because of a lack of leadership qualities. Whether that was the real reason for the decision remains unclear and it frankly doesn't matter now. Maybe they had other reasons too, apart from the obvious political possibility, because I was known not to be too enthusiastic about the Synod of Dordt's definitions, and so forth, apart from other possible deficiencies. Eventually that decision was overturned after a popular revolt from classmates. I wasn't quite sure whether to be elated by this turn of events, as it looked like a last-minute escape from the call to the ministry, but I do appear looking fairly chuffed on the graduation photographs. And besides, the verdict about a lack of leadership qualities was spot-on. So I was never a martyr for a cause and did not suffer any real hardship. Instead the three years of chaplaincy was a most valuable experience and I was sorry when the period was reduced from six to three years, despite the tight budget on which one had to

operate. I still remember many of the patients I met in hospital and a little about the training I received there, if not much.

During a short vacation in 1990 I took a train and travelled as far as Otjiwarongo in Namibia, when the UNTAG presence was already being felt, in preparation for Independence. I guess it must have been a symbolic attempt to atone for the abandonment of the poor conscripts who had to go and dispense death and destruction slightly further North, by embarking on the train journey which they would have taken. It was like visiting the scene of the crime, somehow. But in those days South Africa was a crime scene, even the chaplaincy office at Groote Schuur Hospital, as I have explained above. It was one big gray moral morass and nobody had clean hands, and it was not possible to have clean hands.

Moral of the story? Let us never be proud of our moral decisions, for all is tainted. These days I can see the insufficiency of the pacifist position, and that there are times when love would require one to defend life by taking life. It would still be a sin to atone for afterwards, however, never something to be very proud of. My uncle was right, of course, but at that time I could perhaps not afford to admit it to myself. Do I blame myself in retrospect? Not really. Maybe it taught me to be somewhat humble about moral choices. Even if the decision was open to criticism, it was perhaps the best I could do in my personal circumstances. At any rate, the twisted course events eventually contributed to my becoming an Orthodox priest, at a safe distance from the Synod of Dordt (and maybe Pretoria, for that matter). For I had well and truly burnt or imploded the bridges leading to DRC ministry, if you will allow the metaphor from a former member of COSG.