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The Concept of Nonviolence in the Political Theology of Martin Luther King

This article presents the political theology of Martin Luther King, the leader of the Black movement of liberation in the USA, in the 60s. In the first section of this paper, the notion of political theology is analysed. In the second section I provide an interpretation of King's arguments in favour of nonviolence strategy in political action. The standard model of nonviolence protest is presented in the third section. In the fourth section I discuss some philosophical and political controversies arising around passive resistance. In the last fifth section, the paper is closed by concluding remarks.

I

The thought and activity of Martin Luther King exerted a great impact on public life of the United States being an inspiration and encouragement to fight with injustice and inequality in many parts of the world.¹ Therefore, it is worth looking closer at the content of his thought. However, before I present the most important motives of King's theological thought, I would like to consider the structure of political theology. Its characteristic feature is investigation and interpretation of social reality in ethical categories drawn from the

¹ Of the numerous biographical books on King I am referring to: Branch (1989), Edmund (1976), Fairclough (1995), Garrow (1965) and Miller (1969).

Revelation: natural or written in the Bible. In political theology understood in such a way, it is possible to distinguish three dimensions:

- 1) descriptive – that is description of social reality in ethical categories;
- 2) normative – a project of the ideal society which manifests God's purpose and reflects His moral patterns;
- 3) pragmatic – reflection on the adequate selection of tools and means allowing for transition from real state of affairs to a postulated one.

The theological thought of Martin Luther King comprises all these three dimensions. King described and criticised in theological categories the racial segregation in the southern states of the USA. Moreover, he proposed the project of *the beloved community* – a racially integrated society without discrimination of any of its members. Also in the pragmatic part of his theology, he considers how to pass from real state of social affairs to the one postulated by him. Therefore, the strategy of social change by nonviolent methods belonged to the pragmatic dimension of King's political theology.

II

Social degradation of black community in the southern states of the United States led King to justification of political struggle with this state of affairs. For this reason King built theology of political disobedience. He maintained that each religion puts on its believers a duty of caring about the good of one's neighbour:

Religion reminds every man that he is his brother's keeper. To accept injustice or segregation passively is to say to the oppressor that his actions are morally right. It is a way of allowing his conscience to fall asleep. At this moment the oppressed fails to be his brother's keeper. So acquiescence – while often the easier way – is not the moral way. It is the way of the coward.²

² *Stride toward Freedom*, in: Washington (1986), p. 482.

But the problem arises what kind of method of political behaviour should be chosen. King distinguished three kinds of possible attitude: acquiescence, violence and nonviolent resistance. He argued that acquiescence is just silent agreement and acceptance of an unjust situation. However, an uncontrolled outbreak of violence is not a solution because it creates more problems than it solves. King in arguing for favour of the method of nonviolence in political praxis, applied three kinds of arguments: anthropological, political, and theological.

On the anthropological level King's strategy of political action was derived from a certain vision of man which was fusion of perspectives of liberal and neo-orthodox theology. A Baptist pastor questioned a too optimistic vision of liberal theology on human nature. Liberal theology trusted the human mind too much and neglected the presence of the evil and sin which exist; in the individual and collective dimension. Because of this, he was interested in neo-orthodox theological thought, which he treated as a useful correction of liberal theology. This modification allowed to see the real existence of evil and the fact that mind could be also the tool of the sin justifying immoral behaviour. According to King:

I am now convinced that the truth about man is found neither in liberalism nor in neo-orthodoxy. Each represents a partial truth. A large segment of Protestant liberalism defined man only in terms of his essential nature, his capacity for good. Neo-orthodoxy tended to define man only in terms of his existential nature, his capacity for evil. An adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both.³

To make such a synthesis – according to the spirit of Hegelian triad – is a fundamental philosophical task. To ascertain that man has a tendency toward the right and wrong is only an eclectic cluster of both concepts. However from this, somehow eclectic view on human nature, King drew some conclusions of political nature.

³ *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*, in: ibidem (1986), p. 36.

Namely, King chose such a political strategy that strengthens man's tendency toward the right. This purpose excluded the method of political struggle based on the violence. King emphasised that violence is immoral. Therefore, we can not use immoral means in order to achieve moral goals. Moreover, the violence is ineffective because instead of solving social problems it causes new ones. First of all, violence draws society into the spiral of the wrong and revenge. Consequently, it brings about conflicts, which are permanently passing from generation to generation. King proposed to replace violence by a different method of political struggle—rejection of co-operation with the evil.

On the political level he argued that the method of nonviolence allows to achieve an expected goal – a racially integrated society. Resistance without violence is not a method for the cowards but for the brave. This kind of resistance is physically passive but spiritually active. Its purpose is not humiliation of the enemy but reconciliation. Nonviolent resistance is directed against the evil, against wrong deeds and injustice but not against the individual and people. The people who give up violence should accept punishment as a consequence of the breaking of injustice law. They should renounce the revenge. Pointing out the example of Socrates in *Crito*, King assumed that this attitude is a moral appeal to society for the change of unjust law. Passive resistance has a peaceful character not only from the outside but also from the inside because man gives up the spirit of coercion. Owing to the method of nonviolence moral means are in agreement with moral ends. Achieving of the beloved community is impossible without moral transformation of the enemy.

King also used practical arguments maintaining that in American conditions the method of nonviolence is very efficient. It brought about few victims in comparison with social changes. The boycott of public buses in Montgomery from 1955 to 1956 abolished segregation in public transportation in almost all the cities of the South; in 1960 the so-called sitting demonstrations in the course of one year liquidated segregation in bars and restaurants in 150 cities; the Rides of Freedom in 1961 eliminated racial segregation in inter-state bus transportation, Birmingham protests in 1963 suppressed eliminated

racial segregation in the trade, Selma protests improved electoral law, etc.

Moreover, the nonviolence political strategy caused awakening of dignity among the blacks. The people who rejected the use of violence could gain support of public opinion and were seen as equal with their prosecutors. The civilised world supported their fight and their rights.

On the theological level the method of nonviolence was suited to the Christian love of the neighbour. After Swedish theologian, Anders Nygers, King differentiates in the New Testament three kinds of love: *eros* (romantic, aesthetic and erotic love), *philia* (feeling for friends) and *agape*. This last kind of love is truly a Christian device described in the New Testament. It is forgiving, permanently restoring benevolence directed to everybody without exception. Christian love is unselfish, not passive but active and fulfilled in practical dimension. It is not limited to chosen people but it wants to go "second mile" and build the community. For King, Christian *agape*:

means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers. To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself. For example, white men often refuse federal aid to educate in order to avoid giving the Negro his rights; but because all men are brothers they cannot deny Negro children without harming their own. They end, all efforts to the contrary, by hurting themselves. Why is this? Because men are brothers. If you harm me, you harm yourself.⁴

The social consequence of Christian love is peace. King distinguished between positive and negative peace. The negative peace is superficial because it is based on injustice, exploitation, and violence. On the other hand, positive peace does not only mean the nonexistence of tensions, conflicts or wars but it leads to the existence in social space of some positive features: justice, benevolence, brotherhood. This kind of peace is achievable in the beloved community – King's utopian project of society proclaimed by him in

⁴ *An Experiment in Love*, in: *ibidem*, p. 20.

the speech given at Lincoln's statue in Washington, D.C. where the blacks and the whites, previous slaves and previous lords would live together.

III

What did the nonviolent protest look like? In this section I answer this question by presenting a standard model of a nonviolent action. Firstly, the organisers gathered information of cases of racial discrimination and examined their legal status. This information was carefully verified. Afterwards, the organisers selected clear-cut defined target of protest and their demands. Before beginning the action they tried to interest public opinion in the particular case of segregation chosen by them. At the same time, financial funds were gathered and potential participants of the protest were trained. Each of them had to pass through a process of self-improvement and sign the so called commitment card. Its requirements were as follows:

1. MEDITATE daily on the teaching and life of Jesus.
2. REMEMBER always that the nonviolent movement (...) seeks justice and reconciliation – not victory.
3. WALK and TALK in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. PRAY daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. SACRIFICE personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. OBSERVE with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. SEEK to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. REFRAIN from the violence of first tongue, or heart.
9. STRIVE to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. FOLLOW the direction of the movement and of the captain of a demonstration."⁵

When attempts to remove a particular case of segregation by negotiations failed, they began demonstrations and demanded abolition of segregation in chosen public areas. If a demonstration appeared to be inefficient, they decided to break law: some participants of protest ordered food in restaurants, the others walked in parks designed only for the whites, etc. It led to arrests of people who broke segregation rules. The persecuted accepted it without

protest because the purpose of passive resistance was bringing out social tension and dramatically presenting a given problem in the eye of public opinion.

It is worth emphasising that an integral part of each protest was a propaganda campaign. The pressure of mass-media and support of public opinion forced intervention of the federal government or High Court which acknowledged behaviour of state (or local) authorities illegal. An agreement with the local authorities usually ended the campaign of protest.

IV

The method of nonviolence brought out numerous controversies and polemics. Hanes Walton, Jr analysing political philosophy of Martin Luther King questions the universality of the method of passive resistance. According to Walton, each social action is part of a more sophisticated social process. Therefore, a certain model of behaviour can not be absolutely good or absolutely evil. Its estimation depends on a wider context in which it occurred. Walton is sceptical about effectiveness of nonviolence in the domain of international relations (for example in case of aggression of one state on another) and in a totalitarian system.

He also remarks that effectiveness of passive resistance was different in the different regions of the United States. In the South, where the enemy was clearly defined (white opponents of equality of rights) and discrimination had a political character, nonviolence brought about benefits. The situation in the North where the blacks, formally equal, met economic discrimination was different. Their degradation was not a result of activity of particular persons or institutions but general economic situation and impersonal mechanisms of economic development. The lack of clear-cut defined personified enemy caused an inefficiency of strategy adopted by King. Walton also suggests that public opinion tolerated King because it was afraid of more radical black activists (Black Nation of Islam, Black Power, etc.).

⁵ *Why we can't wait*, in: *ibidem*, p. 537.

In Walton's interpretation, King's choice of nonviolence was determined not by pragmatic but mainly religious reasons:

The starting point of King's philosophy, as well as his final vision, was basically religious, dependent upon his faith in God and in the power of love to transform the hearts and minds of men. These two great forces were seen as responsible for holding together the universe, and as being continually manifest throughout the unity of creation. From this perception of spiritual unity, King's entire philosophy is derived. Man, rooted in God, depends for his growth and self-expression on his relationship to God. The greatest good is the unity of all life, and self-fulfilment consists in helping and service the whole of mankind. Loving service toward all is nonviolence. Thus, God can be pursued only by non-violent means. As a corollary, King insisted that to achieve the greatest good for all, the means must be as pure as the end, and there must be no dual ethical code for individual and group conduct.⁶

However justifying the nonviolence on the pragmatic level King revokes arguments taken from Gandhi, Thoreau or Jesus. This eclecticism, according to Walton was derived from the fact that "King's call to nonviolent action must be regarded in terms not only of a moral philosophy but of tremendously appealing social myth with the power to effect broad and significant changes."⁷ Such a myth, according to Walton, appeals to emotions rather than to mind shaping human imagination and social conduct stronger than intellectual arguments.

It seems to me that for understanding of King's concept of nonviolence analysis of his conduct is as important as interpretation of his words. For example, differences between him and Gandhi were more fundamental than King admitted. It was not only, as King ascertained, the blend of "the spirit of Jesus with technics of Gandhi", but nonviolence fulfilled a different function in the structure of King's political theology. For Gandhi, passive resistance was philosophy of life, for King instead – only political strategy which served an achievement of particular purposes. Therefore, King did not consider the range of application of nonviolence and in accidental statements did

not question the rights of active defence in case of attack or using of force in a defensive war. Passive resistance was only a certain kind of political strategy, efficient in the struggle with racial segregation in the USA and the building of a racially integrated society.

Now, I would like to reconstruct social context in which this method of protest is most effective. Its effectiveness is dependent on a degree of fulfilment of the following social conditions:

- (i) existence of independent public opinion;
- (ii) existence of mass-media which sympathises with the persecuted;
- (iii) existence of the government which depends on public opinion and has to gain civic support in elections;
- (iv) persecutors, the persecuted, public opinion and central authority shared this same system of values, and accepted legal order.

This reconstruction of the social context allows to consider the effectiveness of this method in the domain of foreign policy. Generally speaking, it is dependent on the degree of fulfilment of the conditions mentioned above. Firstly, the stable international system of states has to exist. Secondly, these states should share common values and legal norms. Thirdly, this international system of state should be able to create a network of international institutions which impose compliance of these norms. If these conditions are fulfilled, it is possible to imagine a situation when a potential aggressor resigns from an invasion under the pressure of international public opinion and sanctions applied by international institutions. For these reasons, it is far from creation of such an international order.

This reconstruction allows to answer a question whether nonviolence is efficient in a totalitarian system. Generally speaking, it depends on the phase of development of this system.⁸ For example, in the conditions of the rise of totalitarian system (the period of Bolshevik rule in Russia in the 20s) where power tended to maximise its sphere of regulation over social life, none of the conditions

⁶ Walton (1971), p. 107.

⁷ Walton (1971), p. 88.

⁸ On the mechanisms of dynamic of real socialism see e.g. : Nowak (1991) and historical operationalisation of this theory: Siegel (1992).

mentioned above was fulfilled. Therefore, the hunger strikes of prisoners – one of the forms of nonviolent protest – appeared to be ineffective. I would like to quote Alexander Soltżenicyn who wrote: "A hunger strike is only a moral weapon. Each prisoner who uses it makes an assumption that his warder has conscience. Or that he is afraid of public opinion. And only in these conditions the hunger-strike is efficient".⁹

However in conditions of decline of totalitarian system, the nonviolent strategy became more and more efficient. This situation prevailed in the period of the late People's Republic of Poland when communist power was gradually loosening control over the people. Nonviolent strategy was deliberately applied by Polish opposition in the second half of the 70s and quite spontaneously by Polish dockyard workers in Gdańsk in August 1980 bringing about desired social changes. At that time in Poland existed an independent public opinion and civil society organised by political opposition and supported by the Catholic Church. There were also independent mass media, for example, Western radio stations, underground publishing houses and periodicals. Although there was not a parliamentary democracy in Poland, the leadership of the Communist Party had to count on the support of Polish public opinion and Western states, which were creditors of Gierek's state. Finally, the leadership of the Communist Party and the Strike Committee looked for common values. The slogan 'Let us talk like a Pole with a Pole' was an attempt to create such a common plane of dialogue.

V

Martin Luther King's concept of nonviolence was a valuable contribution to political as well as, theological thought. However, as his political program was derived from liberal theology of which he was a fervent adherent.¹⁰ It decided on historical limitations set on his

⁹ Soltżenicyn (1988), p. 425.

¹⁰ On historical limitations of King's theology see: Gruchy (1995), p. 131-143; Zoba (1995), p. 15-24.

theological thought. Although King's theological program can be criticised for being naïve and eclectic it is worth to remember that in historical conditions of the USA in the 50s and 60s it provided the most adequate political strategy, which caused the desired social changes at minimal social cost and avoided bloody social revolution. Another problem arises with the range of application of this method. It seems to me that its effectiveness depends on the social context in which it is applied. Therefore, it was efficient in conditions of Poland and ostensibly inefficient in the political conditions of the Soviet Union in the 20s and it is still inefficient in the domain of foreign policy.

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