

Gandhiji's Ahimsa and Conflict Resolution: A Critical Study

S.C. Daniel

[Dr. S.C. Daniel, Retired Professor of Philosophy, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India]

Gandhiji (1869- 1948) was an advocate of non-violent mass political action. He is rightly acknowledged as the father of the independent Indian Nation. He called his approach Satyagraha. He considered Satyagraha a science whose end is truth and method ahimsa or nonviolence. He emphasized constructive resolution, rather than elimination of conflict, the interrelatedness of means and ends (precluding evil means to evil ends), and the importance of enduring suffering oneself rather than inflicting it upon adversaries.

Gandhiji took ahimsa to be more than mere abstention from violence and to call for courage, discipline, and love of an opponent. He was not an absolutist. Though he always preferred ahimsa, he would choose violence rather than cowardice when forced. He was a man of practice more than a theoretician and claimed the superiority of Satyagraha to violence by means of demonstration; not argument.

Deenabandhu (C.F. Andrews) speaks of Gandhiji as follows. He says: "In the times through which India is passing today, with their turmoil and upheaval, it is easy to note how a dynamic personality, such as that of Gandhiji, has inconceivably greater power of moral appeal to remove social abuses, than any mere act of legislation passed in the legislative assembly. Let me make it patently clear to western readers, that this moral appeal, which Gandhiji makes by infinite unseen channels to the innermost soul of India, is due above all to the fact, that it does not depend on any external force, or material wealth, or worldly power, in any shape or form. I have constantly talked to the villagers about this, and invariably I have found that this moral character and that alone has been the secret of his supreme attraction. He has become the embodiment of their own idea of goodness".[1] Again, "No one has seen the truth (the manufactures of Lancashire involved the ruin of flourishing Indian village industries) of what I have been briefly describing more clearly than Gandhiji. He has a genius of the highest order, when dealing with the poor people of his own country. For he enters into their lives in such a way, that he becomes actually identified with them. If they suffer, or commit violence, he fasts, either as a penance, or out of sympathy with them, just as naturally and simply as St. Francis of Assisi did in the Middle Ages. He has felt, more than any one else, the economic pressure of foreign rule on the poor people of India under the peculiar modern conditions which they faced".[2] Further, "... God has spared his life for our sakes and for the sake of humanity: and we pray that it may be still longer preserved. For there is no single man in the whole world today who is so deeply and universally beloved as Mahatma Gandhi."[3]

Jawaharlal Nehru said of Gandhiji: "He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and

removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all, the working of people's mind".[4]

R. P. Kyndiah says: "Gandhi's advocacy of Satyagraha, or soul-force, as the creed to achieve freedom against the background of the successful revolution in Soviet Russia gave rise to certain skepticism on the efficacy of his methodology, particularly in dealing with the mighty economic and military power that Britain was. But such doubts were speedily removed when an unprecedented and spontaneous response of the people from all walks of life all over the country burst forth to the call of Gandhi to join the movement. Gandhi showed how and in what way to fight the British through personal example. And this he did by invoking a sense of civilized reasoning and human fair play that the British prided in and claimed to stand for".[5]

The great Albert Einstein spoke of Gandhiji thus: "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon the earth".[6]

I have given the above quotations to emphasize and underline that Gandhiji's genius, greatness, sincerity, selfless spirit of nationalism, robust honesty, simplicity, moral integrity and spirituality can never be questioned. Anthony Parel says: "there were of course a number of things that were distinctive about him (Gandhiji) – *his commitment to peaceful resolution of conflicts, his passionate desire for political independence, his moral integrity, his spirituality, his environmentally sensitive mode of personal life, his defense of the underdog, his freedom from religious prejudice etc.* Admirable as these qualities were, they were grounded on a solid philosophic foundation. The basic components of his philosophy are well known – *Satyagraha, ahimsa, sarvodaya and swaraj*"[7] I would like to concentrate on his method of conflict resolution.

The world conflict (noun) means the following. 1. A serious disagreement or argument. 2. Prolonged armed struggle. 3. An incompatibility between opinions, principle, etc. The synonyms of 'conflict' are 'clash' and 'dispute'. The word resolution means 1. The quality of being resolute 2. A firm decision, 3. An expression of opinion or intention agreed on by a legislative body. 4. The action of solving a problem or dispute. 5. The process of reducing or separating something into components. 6. The smallest interval measurable by the telescope or other scientific instrument. 7. The degree of detail visible in a photographic or television image. In the context of 'Gandhiji's ahimsa and conflict resolution', conflict resolution means constructive resolution, that is, the action of solving a problem or dispute by means of ahimsa rather than elimination of it.

What did Gandhiji understand by ahimsa? Without answering this significant question, it is meaningless to discuss ahimsa as a tool for conflict resolutions. Therefore, a succinct exposition of Gandhiji's understanding of what ahimsa is follows. Ahimsa is one of the core concepts of Gandhiji's philosophy. Ahimsa has been preached by religious prophets as a cardinal moral virtue. Gandhiji claims that his belief in ahimsa is independent of the sanctions of the scriptures. He based his concept of ahimsa on *The Gita*. He was also inspired by Tolstoy's "*The Kingdom of God is within you*".

The word 'ahimsa' literally means non-injury. It has a narrow as well as a broad meaning. Narrow meaning indicates non-killing while broad meaning, harmlessness. As early as 1916 Gandhiji distinguished between the negative and positive meaning of ahimsa. He says: "In its negative form it means not injuring any living being whether by body or mind. 'I may not, therefore, hurt the person of any wrong doer or bear any ill-will to him and so cause him mental suffering'. This statement does not cover suffering caused to the wrong doer by natural acts of mine which do not proceed from ill-will... Ahimsa requires deliberate self-suffering, not a deliberate injuring of the supposed wrong doer.... In its positive form Ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of Ahimsa, I must love my enemy or a stranger to me as I would do to my wrong-doing father or son. This active ahimsa necessarily includes truth and fearlessness." [8]

The path of ahimsa is the path of non-attachment and it entails continuous suffering and the cultivating of endless patience. Ahimsa implies not merely a certain attitude of detached sympathy towards an enemy, but also the denial of the very existence of an enemy. Sometimes, Gandhiji declares that complete ahimsa is complete absence of ill-will, that active ahimsa is good will towards all life, this ahimsa in this sense is a perfect state and the goal towards which mankind moves naturally though unconsciously. Gandhiji believes in the universalizability of ahimsa. He says: "The basic principle on which the practice of non-violence rests is that what holds good in respect of ourself equally applies to the whole universe. All mankind in essence are alike. What is, therefore, possible for one is possible for everybody." [9]

This universalizable principle states that what is possible for one is possible for every body. And this principle bears a remarkable similarity to Kant's principle of universalizability. Therefore, a few words about the Kantian principle may not be out of place here. One moral criterion implicit in Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative is often called the principle of universality. It may be recalled that categorical imperative is a moral obligation or command that is unconditionally and universally binding. Kant's first formulation of categorical imperative may be stated succinctly as follows: "Act only that that maxim that you can at the same time will to be a universal law". Needless to point out that Kant offers this categorical imperative as a maxim of action. An action that satisfies this maxim of action is said to be universalizable and hence morally acceptable. It follows from this that an action that does not satisfy this maxim of action is said to be not universalizable, and hence contrary to moral duty or moral law or what is morally acceptable. Kant takes this maxim of action as a percept that satisfies the formal criteria of a universal law, and he takes formal criteria to be the marks of reason. Consequently, moral principles are laws that originate or spring from reason. The rational human beings give to themselves laws that regulate their conduct as rational beings. They are laws for a republic of reason, or as Kant says, a kingdom of ends whose legislature comprises all rational beings. This shows that moral principles derive their authority from the sovereignty of reason.

Although, Gandhiji prefers to use a negative term like 'non-violence' to describe ahimsa, he regards ahimsa as a positive force superior to all the forces of brutality. The negative word has its advantages for Gandhiji. He wants the acceptance of ahimsa to imply a deliberate stand against ill-will, a method of action based upon self-restraint. Ahimsa may ultimately be identical with divine love, the sense of oneness with all. But in its immediate and daily application it must be distinguished from the feeling of love and benevolence as well as from the mere hatred of

violence. Non-violence is not a resignation from real fighting against weakness, but a more active fight against wickedness than retaliation. Gandhiji says: “This Ahimsa is the basis of the search for truth. I am realizing everyday that the search is vain unless it is founded on Ahimsa as the basis.”[10] Here, he tries to express that satya and ahimsa are interdependable. Satya cannot be found without ahimsa as its basis, and full state of ahimsa cannot be achieved without satya as its basis. This is explained as follows: “The truth which is the aim of the practitioner of Ahimsa is to realize spiritual identity with all reality as with members of, one and the same, family. It is Ahimsa or love which mediates in order to identify the discerning one with the one discerned. If the one discerned is indeed a sinner the discerning one cannot be anything but a sinner either. Love finds or makes equals. Truth is in identity and community of one with the other, either in sin or in goodness and beauty. The hope in the power of truth or love to transform anything implies the convertibility of the evil doer into a benefactor, of the sinner into a holy one, of the violent into the non-violent.”[11]

Ahimsa, for Gandhiji, necessarily presupposes the willingness to suffer and the readiness to die for one’s conviction. And this self-sacrifice calls for extraordinary love. Due to this love or loving kindness, one cannot be, but, non-violent. But such realization of non-violence is not something passive. It is a dynamic process of mind that involves continuous and persistent efforts. Ahimsa, according to Gandhiji, is a value, an intrinsic value.

Gandhiji’s appeal to ahimsa is ultimately an appeal to the conscience and the reason of the individual, an affirmation of the dignity and divinity of the human soul, the apotheosis of purity of means in the pursuit of any social or political goal. He declares that if one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself, and ahimsa is the means. Gandhiji was able to use ahimsa as an effective tool to solve many a conflict and many a problem. It is a well known and an historical fact that he succeeded in converting a passive principle of meek submission to evil and injustice into a dynamic doctrine of non-violent activity in the cause of truth and justice. Albert Schweitzer recognizes this remarkable capacity of Gandhiji when he says: “Gandhi continues what the Buddha began. In the Buddha the spirit of love set itself the task of creating different spiritual condition in the world; in Gandhi it undertakes to transform all worldly conditions.”[12] Gandhiji used ahimsa as a political and social instrument to bring about freedom and justice. He applied ahimsa to economic, social, religious, and political conflicts. It is no exaggeration to point out that he succeeded to a great extent in resolving many an economic, social, religious and political crisis.

It is no exaggeration to say that Gandhiji’s ahimsa is closely related to love. In this connection, I would like to bring out the affinity between Gandhiji and Christianity vis a vis love. Funk and Wagnalls define a Christian as follows: “Christian – adj – 1. Professing or following the religion of Christ; esp., affirming the divinity of Christ. 2. Relating to or derived from Christ or his doctrine. 3. Characteristic of Christianity or Christendom. 4. Informal: 1. Human, civilized, decent-n. 2. One who believes in or professes belief in Jesus as the Christ; 3. A member of any of the Christian Churches. 4. Informal: A civilized, decent or respectable person.”[13] I would make an attempt to establish that Gandhiji was a Christian in the informal sense of 1 of 4, though he was not a Christian in the sense of 1,2,3, and 2 and 3 of the informal sense.

It is very difficult to determine Gandhiji's religious affiliation. The difficulty of pinning down Gandhiji's religious affiliation was mentioned by the Reverend J.J. Doke as early as 1909. He says: "A few days ago I was told that 'he is a Buddhist'. Not long since, a Christian newspaper described him as a Christian Mohammedan, extra-ordinary mixture indeed... I question whether any system of religion can absolutely hold him. His views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu: and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian, while his sympathies are so wide and Catholic that one would imagine he has reached a point where the formulae of sets are meaningless".[14] However, I would try to establish that Gandhiji can be considered a Christian in the informal sense of 2 of point 4 for the following reason.

Though Gandhiji did not enjoy reading the Old Testament, he was immensely impressed by the New Testament, especially by the Sermon on the Mount[15]. In the verses 39 and 40 Jesus says: "But I say unto you. That ye resist not evil: but whosoever smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also": "And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also" simply delighted him. According to Gandhiji, the sermon on the Mount gives the law of love or "the law of abandon", in wonderful language describing it in a vivid manner. He said, "The New Testament gave me comfort and boundless joy".[16] He believed in the virtues of loving one's neighbour as oneself and of doing good and charitable work among one's fellowmen. These virtues did not remain as mere beliefs in the life of Gandhiji. He practiced them to the fullest of his ability. According to him, Jesus taught and practiced essentially a social and collective virtue. Needless to say that Gandhiji too did the same, being primarily a social reformer, a conflict manager. He not only approved of Christ's precepts of non-retaliation and non-resistance to evil, but also put them into effective use in his struggle against British imperialism and social injustice that were rampant in India during his time. He believed that one cannot have real peace unless there is an intense longing for peace all around. He, therefore, preached a message of love with an insatiable desire for establishing peace not only in India but also in the whole world. Gandhiji possessed inner peace to a great extent. It is said that even some Christians were jealous of Gandhiji that he possessed inner peace. He was convinced that a person is truly non-violent, if and only if, he asks God to forgive his enemies, even his murderer. It is very obvious that this conviction of him was very much influenced by the forgiving nature of Christ. It may be noted here that Christ asked God the Father to forgive even those who were responsible for his crucifixion. He said from the cross: "Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do"[17]. For this reason, Gandhiji regarded Christ as the paradigm on non-violence or Ahimsa-Gandhiji too asked God to forgive his enemies, even his murderer.

The concept of Christian love is explicated in the Gospel according to St. Matthew as follows. Jesus said: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For all ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father which is in heaven is perfect."[18] This passage is acknowledged as the central and most famous section of the Sermon on the Mount. It expresses the Christian ethic of personal relations. Even the non-practising Christians understand that this passage described the core of Christianity in action. We

must try to find out what Jesus was really saying, and what he was demanding of his followers. What does Jesus mean by loving our enemies?

Greek is a language which is rich in synonyms; its words often have shades of meaning which English does not possess. It is to be noted that the New Testament was originally written in Greek language. In Greek there are four different words of love, which are: 1) there is a noun *storge* with its accompanying verb *stergein*. These words signify family love. These words described the love between parent and children. 2) There is a noun *eros* whose corresponding verb is *eran*. This noun and the verb stand for the love between a man and a woman. This love involves human passion in them, which involves sexual love. This sort of love involves lust rather than love. It is to be noted that this kind of love is not mentioned in the New Testament. 3) There is the noun *philia* and its corresponding verb *philein*. These words stand for genuine love, genuine affection. This sort of love signifies the highest kind of love which is conditional. 4) There is the noun *agape* with its verb *agapan*. *Agape* is the word which is used in this passage. This sort of love stands for unconquerable benevolence, invisible goodwill. *Agape* is unconditional love. It never expects anything in return. If we have *agape* towards a person, we love this person despite all his shortcomings and wickedness. This kind of love seeks nothing but the highest good for the person concerned. Certain things emerge from this sort of interpretation. 1) We are not expected to love our enemies in the same way we love our beloved. In any case, this is not possible. 2) We love our nearest and the dearest from our hearts. This love emanates from the emotions of our hearts. In other words, this sort of love is spontaneous, natural. It is something that we cannot help. But in the case of our enemies, love must be not only from the heart, it must be also from the will. It is not instinctive, but voluntary. It has to be willed. It is a superior love, which does not come naturally to an ordinary man. *Agape* entails determination, discipline, and strong resolution. *Agape* results in good will to all men. 3) *Agape* and Christian love are identical, inseparable. If we have *agape* towards a person, we punish and discipline him, not out of any evil desire for revenge, but for making him a better man. Christian punishment and Christian discipline aim at prevention, not vengeance. In other words, they would be remedial. 4) It deals with personal relationships with our family, neighbours and others. It sets right our personal relationship with other human beings. This relationship is basic and fundamental. Without being able to have a proper personal relationship, it is not possible to have any other kind of proper relationship. 5) This commandment asks us to do something for others, our enemies. We are asked to pray for our enemies. We cannot pray for our enemies, and still hate them. Gandhiji is of the opinion that one who hates suffers more than the one who is hated. Gandhiji uses love, *agape*, as a powerful tool to end any kind of conflict.

Is it possible for us to love our enemies? Both Christianity and Gandhiji are convinced that we can, because both believe in the divinity of man. The man who cares most for men is the most perfect man. Gandhiji was the most perfect man because he cared for and loved most men. It is the whole teaching of the Bible that we achieve our personhood only by becoming god like, Christ like. We can achieve personhood by forgiving and loving our enemies.

The Christian love is bereft of resentment and of retaliation. In order to explicate this statement, I would like to quote a passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. I quote: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any

man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.”[19] If you stand face to face with another man, it is natural to strike him on the left cheek with the right hand. Striking him on the right cheek would amount to striking him with the back of the right hand with the avowed intention and desire of causing him extreme insult and humiliation. Jesus begins by citing the oldest law in the world – an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. This law is known as the Lex Talionis – the law of tit for tat. This passage reveals three golden rules when looked at it very closely, namely, (1) The Christian never seeks retaliation for an insult, however humiliating. (2) The Christian never stands upon legal rights. In fact, he does not consider himself to have any rights at all, and (3) the Christian instead always thinks of duties. Gandhiji, would agree with all these three golden rules. Gandhiji has said time and again that we have no rights, but only duties.

Gandhiji, being a truthful practitioner of ahimsa, accepted Jesus as a martyr and an embodiment of sacrifice. He himself became a martyr by laying down his own life, which is the greatest form of sacrifice, for what he stood for. He was of the opinion that faith must be lived so that it becomes self-propagating. It may be emphasized here that he practiced what he preached. He never sermonized, but demonstrated by action. He lived his faith in Satya, Ahimsa and Satyagraha, so much so, that these three central principles of his social philosophy became self-propagating. Like Christ, he proved to be a great Karmayogi. Gandhiji said: “If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my interpretation of it, I shall not hesitate to say, ‘Oh yes, I am a Christian’.”[20] He had a great desire to serve the people. He remarked: “I must have the desire to serve and it must put me right with people.”[21] His whole life was a powerful testimony to this desire of his, and I have no doubt that he succeeded to a great extent in putting himself right with his people. He believed that one’s life is more eloquent than his lips. He followed this golden rule to the letter. He was of the opinion that language is an obstacle to the full expression of thought. This is why he valued silence and practiced silence whenever he could. Christian too value silence. A Christian believes that being still he can come to know his God: “Be still and know that I am God:...”[22] Gandhiji emphasized duty to the complete neglect of rights, for he believed that duty is debt while right belongs to a creditor. This view of his is similar to that of Christianity.

Philip Yancy says: “Though not a Christian by *belief or practice*, Gandhiji attempted to an impressive degree to live out some of the very same principles that characterized Jesus”.[23] He further points out: “Gandhi never called himself a Christian and was never tempted to become one, but he was a devout admirer of Jesus... He credited Christianity for two of his significant guiding principles: non-violence and simple living.”[24]

It is a fact that many a formal Christian does not live a true Christian life. On the other hand, history is replete with instances where non-Christians lived according to the spirit of Christian life. Gandhiji, in my considered opinion, was one such person; for, he went about doing good to others and practiced the virtue of forgiveness. That he practiced the virtue of forgiveness becomes evident by the fact that he enjoyed a long and healthy life. In Gandhiji’s life certain paramount Christian virtues like non-violence and simple living reigned supreme. Moreover, he laid down his life for the principle he cherished in an act of self-sacrifice. Needless to say that self-sacrifice for a good cause is one of the greatest, probably the greatest, Christian virtue. I

would conclude therefore that Gandhiji was a Christian in the informal sense of the term “Christian” for, he was a “civilized, decent, respectable person”.

In an age of violence, Gandhiji fearlessly preached and practiced the gospel of ahimsa – the only gospel which can make war impossible. To the unarmed people of India, he gave the weapons of non co-operation and civil disobedience. Through these powerful weapons, he could resolve many political conflicts. Needless to point out that these weapons were based on the principle of ahimsa. His application of ahimsa for conflict resolutions in political field is well known. His achievement was the attainment of political freedom for India from the Britishers. However, his application of ahimsa to non-political fields for conflict resolutions is much less known. Therefore, I would like to refer to some of them here. Gandhiji’s first disobedience movement was against a case of economic injustice. His next non-violent fight was also directed against economic injustice. It is worth noting that Gandhiji’s doctrine of ahimsa has a much wider application than we generally think of. In fact, it can be applied to all walks of life without any exception. It can be applied even to domestic quarrels.

Robert L. Holmes classifies non-violence into the following categories. 1) Unconditional non-violence, this consists in renunciation of violence in all actual and hypothetical circumstances, 2) Conditional non-violence, this justifies violence in hypothetical circumstances, but denies it in practice, 3) Principled non-violence, this kind of non-violence is based on moral grounds. It is of two kinds; namely (i) Principled non-violence that is based on an ethics of conduct, and (ii) principled non-violence that is based on ethics of virtue. (i) Is expressed as a moral rule or principle to guide action, and (ii) Consists in developing traits and dispositions of a non-violent character. As a principle, non-violence may be either basic or derivative. The justification of non-violence as a principle will be either utilitarian or deontological. 4) Pragmatic non-violence is held on non-moral grounds. It consists in holding that non-violence is a means to specific social, political, economic or other ends, which are also held on non-moral grounds. It is result oriented, and its justification is based on its effectiveness corresponding to the purpose[25].

Gandhiji’s principle of non-violence is based on moral grounds and thus it is principled non-violence. It is a basic principle. Other principles can be derived from it, but it can never be derived from any other principle. It is an end in itself. It is an intrinsic value. Therefore, it can never be a means to an end. In this connection, it would be profitable to know the views of Gandhiji concerning the relation between means and ends. Gandhiji does not make a distinction between means and ends. He never believed that end justifies the means. For him, the means also must equally justify the end. For him, means and ends are equally important.

I would like to conclude my essay by quoting Jawaharlal Nehru. He said: “What kind of triumph did Gandhiji wish for us? Not the triumph for which people and countries strive through violence, fraud, treachery and evil means. That kind of victory is not stable. For the foundation of a lasting victory can only be laid on the rock of truth. Gandhiji gave us a new method of struggle and political warfare and a new kind of diplomacy. He demonstrated the efficacy of truth and goodwill and nonviolence in politics. He taught us to respect and co-operate with every Indian as a man and as a fellow-citizen, irrespective of his political belief or religious creed. We all belong to Mother India and have to live and die here. We are all equal partners in the freedom that we have won. Everyone of our three or four hundred million people must have an equal right

to the opportunities and blessings that free India has to offer. It was not for a few privileged persons that Gandhiji strove for and died for. We have to strive for the same ideal and in the same way. Then only shall we be worthy to say “Mahatma Gandhiji Ki Jai.”[26]

Endnotes

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