

GANDHIJI'S AHIMSA — VIABLE STRATEGY FOR LIBERATION TODAY?

Cyril Desbruslais

Introduction

The name Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the term “non-violence” are practically synonymous in the popular contemporary mind — and rightly so. What this paper intends to discuss is the practical relevance of Gandhiji’s absolutisation of *ahimsa* — his championing of it as the universal, necessary and efficacious solution for redressing all manner of injustices and oppression. I shall argue that, though there is much to be said for non-violence in our world of growing terrorism, coercion and *vigilante* groups, it simply cannot be absolutised. I will show that, for Gandhiji, non-violence was neither a cowardly nor a merely “passive” response to gross evil. I will also express my reservations — for whatever they are worth — with some of the philosophical underpinnings of his doctrine in this regard. However, at the outset, I would like to make it clear that I do not in the least bit mean to question the evident sincerity, sanctity or courage of the *Mahatma* — both, as expressed in his views and lived out in his personal life. It is only some aspects of his practical wisdom that I wish, here, to contest.

1. *Gandhiji on non-Violence*

Gandhiji and Thoreau

Interviewed by American Journalist Webb Miller at Knightsbridge, during the famous Round Table Conference of 1929, Gandhiji, in response to a query, very readily admitted that he was indeed familiar with *Walden* of the eccentric US non-violent civil rights activist Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). In particular, he had been struck by the essay, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.” “Until I read the essay,” he confessed, “I had never found a suitable English word for my Indian word *satyagraha*.” He went on:

You remember that Thoreau invented and practiced the idea of civil disobedience in Concord, Massachusetts, by refusing to pay his poll tax against the United States Government. He went to jail, too. There is no doubt that Thoreau's ideas greatly influenced my movement in India.¹

Thoreau's essay had been written eighty years earlier. Of course, Thoreau had, in his turn, borrowed inspiration from India. Gandhiji, for his part, had long begun to formulate his radical non-violent action plan, drawing on his Hindu and Jain religious traditions. In *Walden* itself, Thoreau repeatedly alluded to his indebtedness to Indian sacred literature and had described himself as one who "loved so well the philosophy of India."² It is interesting to note how so significant an idea as non-violence crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic!

Ahimsa as Love

Gandhiji often said that he saw *ahimsa* as the negative formulation of a definition of love. The following two quotes are typical:

In its positive form, *ahimsa* means the greatest love, greatest charity. If I am a follower of *ahimsa*, I must love my enemy. I must apply the same rules to the wrong-doer who is my enemy or a stranger to me, as I would to my wrong-doing father or son.³

I accept the interpretation of *ahimsa*, namely, that it is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the wrong-doer. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue in the wrong or tolerating it by active acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of *ahimsa*, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically.⁴

Ahimsa is Active and Courageous

In his *Non-Violent Resistance*, Gandhiji reiterates, "Non-cooperation is not a passive state; it is an intensely active state — more active than physical resistance or violence. Passive resistance is a misnomer."⁵ In *All Men Are Brothers*, he makes his stance even more clear:

1 Quoted by Miller (1936); 27.

2 Miller (1936); 27.

3 Gandhi (1968); p. 43.

4 Gandhi (1961); 14.

5 Gandhi (1961); p. 21.

My non-violence does not admit of running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardice, I can only prefer violence to cowardice.⁶

Non-Violence and Religion

Gandhiji claims to find support for his doctrine of non-violence in different religious traditions.

Jesus Christ, Daniel and Socrates represented the purest form of passive resistance or soul force.... Buddha carried the war into the enemy's camp and brought down on its knees an arrogant priesthood. Christ drove out the money-changers from the temple of Jerusalem and drew down curses from Heaven on the hypocrites and the Pharisees. Both were for intensely direct action. But even as the Buddha and Christ chastised, they showed unmistakable gentleness and love behind every action of theirs. They would not raise a finger against their enemies, but would gladly surrender themselves for the truth for which they lived.⁷

The Mahatma had always linked the authentic practice of non-violence together with belief in God, chastity and truthfulness. "Absolute belief in God is a necessary condition in such *satyagraha*,"⁸ he wrote. Furthermore, the votary of *ahimsa* must be chaste:

As with regard to the goal, so with the means: unadulterated purity is of the very essence in such species of *satyagraha*. The leader of such a movement must be a man of deeply spiritual life, preferably a *brahmachari* (one who abstains from all sexual activity) — whether married or unmarried.⁹

As for truthfulness, "Truth and *ahimsa* should shine through [the non-violent person's] speech. All his actions must be transparent through and through. Diplomacy and intrigue can have no place in his armoury."¹⁰

Indeed, he remained quite convinced that non-violence would eventually win the day — or was, in fact, already emerging victorious all over!

If we turn our eyes to the time of which history has not any record down to our time, we shall find that man has been steadfastly progressing

6 Gandhi (1968); p. 26.

7 Gandhi (1968); p. 30.

8 Gandhi (1961); p. 32.

9 Gandhi (1961); p. 20.

10 Gandhi (1961);, p. 11.

towards *ahimsa*. Our remote ancestors were cannibals. Then came a time when they were fed up with cannibalism and they began to live on chase. Next came a stage where man was ashamed of leading the life of a wandering hunter. He, therefore, took to agriculture and depended principally on Mother Earth for food. Thus, from being a nomad, he settled down to civilized stable life, founded villages and towns and, from member of a family, he became member of a community and a nation. All these are signs of a progressing *ahimsa* and diminishing *himsa*. Had it been otherwise, the human species should have been extinct by now, even as so many of the lower species have disappeared.¹¹

The Body is the Root of all Evil

It would seem that Gandhiji would wholeheartedly endorse that kind of body-soul dualism that the Platonists and the Cartesians upheld. He also sees the two in constant strife against each other, with the body as all-evil and the soul as all-good:

Destruction does not need to be taught. Man, as animal, is violent, but as a Spirit is non-violent. The moment he wakes to the Spirit within, he cannot remain all-violent. Either he progresses toward [*ahimsa*] or rushes to his doom.¹²

Elsewhere, he avers, "Violence is needed for the protection of things external; non-violence is needed for the protection of the *atman*, for the protection of one's honor."¹³ And it is a far better thing to protect one's *atman* and honor by non-violence, which entails eschewing violence and sacrificing one's external possessions, in consequence. Were one to fight against an unjust law of the Government, using violence, one would be merely "employing what may be termed body-force." On the other hand, were one "not to obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach," one would be using soul force: "It involves sacrifice of oneself."¹⁴

After all, "Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle, for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason."¹⁵

11 Gandhi (1968); p. 16.

12 Gandhi (1968); p. 87.

13 Gandhi (1968); p. 65.

14 Gandhi (1968); p. 51.

15 Gandhi (1968); p. 52.

Non-violence is an Absolute Requirement

All kinds of violence merit unequivocal and unreserved condemnation, be it the violence of the strong attacking and ravaging the weak, or that desperate violent reaction of the same weak who strike back to defend themselves, their dear ones and their property. "Every murder or other injury, *no matter for what cause*," writes Gandhiji, "committed against another is a crime against humanity."¹⁶ He makes his position even more clear when he imagined himself to be in the shoes of a downtrodden black American of the US Deep South of his times:

Supposing I was (sic!) a Negro, and my sister was ravished by a white or lynched by a whole community, what would be my duty, I ask myself. My answer comes to me: I must not wish ill to these but, neither must I cooperate with them. It may be that ordinarily I depend on the lynching community for my livelihood. I refuse to cooperate with them, refuse to touch the food that comes from them, and I will refuse to cooperate with even brother Negroes who tolerate the wrong. That is the self-immolation I mean.¹⁷

But that seems to be advice to follow *post factum*, i. e., after the horrendous deed. What should be one's reaction were he to confront a howling mob closing in on a hapless, helpless innocent victim? Surely one might be excused for using violence in *that* extreme situation! Apparently no. In a long article in *Harijan* of November 26, 1938, Gandhiji had suggested that the Jews of Germany, upon whose heads the first waves of Nazi brutality were beginning to break, use non-violent *satyagraha* as the sole means to resist the persecution of their people and the confiscation or destruction of their property. The Mahatma was open in his praise for Marshal Petain who surrendered France to the Germans and, on July 6, 1940, made a full-throated "Appeal to Every Briton to Follow France's Example":

I do not want Britain to be defeated, nor do I want her to be victorious in a trial of brute strength.... I want you to fight Nazism without arms or with nonviolent arms. I would like you to lay down the arms you have, as being useless for your humanity. You will invite Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini to take what they want of the countries you call your possessions. Let them take possession of your beautiful island, with your beautiful buildings. You will give all these, but neither your soul nor your minds. If these gentlemen choose to occupy your homes, you will vacate them. If they do not give you safe passage out, you will allow yourself,

¹⁶ Gandhi (1968); p. 39 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Gandhi (1968); p. 41.

man, woman and child to be slaughtered, but you will refuse to owe allegiance to them.¹⁸

Once a *Life* reporter put him a question, "Mr. Gandhi, how would you meet the atom bomb,... with violence?" Pat came the reply:

I will not go into shelter. I will come out in the open and let the pilot see I have no trace of ill will against him. The pilot will not see our faces from his great heights, I know. But the longing in our hearts — that he will come to no harm — would reach up to him and his eyes would be opened.¹⁹

There is no doubt that Gandhiji absolutised non-violence: never and under no circumstance whatsoever could one ever be justified in having recourse to violence, not even in self-defense. "Non-cooperation and civil disobedience are but different branches of the same tree called *satyagraha*," he declared. "It is my *kalpataru*. — the Universal Provider."²⁰

But Absolute non-Violence is Unattainable

Paradoxically, while he advocated the duty of every human to strive for the ideal of total non-violence, Gandhiji was realistic enough to admit that the goal of complete non-violence was not only an unattainable height but a forlorn, impossible dream:

Perfect non-violence is impossible as long as we exist physically, for we would want some space at least to occupy. Perfect non-violence, while you are inhabiting the body is, only a theory, like Euclid's point or straight line, but we have to endeavour to attain it every moment of our lives.²¹

Ahimsa is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortal beings caught in the conflagration of *himsa*. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot live outward *himsa*. The very fact of his living — eating, drinking, moving about — necessarily involves some *himsa*, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of *ahimsa*, therefore, remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the coils of *himsa*. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward *himsa*.²²

18 Gandhi (1940), July 6, 1940.

19 Gandhi (1968); p. 19.

20 Gandhi (1961); p. 67.

21 Gandhi (1968); p. 18.

22 Gandhi (1968); p. 23.

For Gandhiji, life was the supreme value — and he made no distinctions concerning life as we do, as human life, (brute) animal life and vegetative life. He did not allot to each level a higher or lower status than the other, with the consequent obligation to subordinate the latter two to the good of human life. To take life — any form of life — was evil and deplorable. It is to be avoided whenever possible and has to be helplessly accepted when natural functions oblige it!

2. *Some Critical Comments*

Gandhiji and Thoreau

There was at least one more crossing of the Atlantic by Gandhiji's doctrine of *ahimsa*, very pertinent to our discussion here, and it was when the Mahatma's life and message inspired the black civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr (1929–1968). Like his mentor, he was felled by an extremist's bullet and, like him, his career was launched by his leading the people to openly break an unjust law. This was one of the many segregation laws under which non-whites had to suffer in Alabama and other former "slave states" of the US. On April 16, 1963, Dr. King, from his cell in Birmingham County Jail, addressed an open letter to a group of clergymen, Christian and Jewish, who had decried his disobedience of state laws as "unwise and untimely" and had counseled patience and restraint. Averred Dr King,

We know by painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that 'was well timed', according to the timetables of those who have not suffered, unduly, from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word, 'wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'never'.... We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied'.... The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch corner..

There are *just* laws and there are *unjust* laws. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that, 'An unjust law is no law at all.'²³

23 Luther King Jr (1973); 78.

Now, what would constitute an unjust law, for Dr. King? From the context it would seem that any law that asks us to discriminate among human persons is such a law. Any legislation, no matter whence it comes, that asks us to despise certain persons, to consider them inferior and, consequently, deny them basic human rights granted to others — be this on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, skin — color, religious/political beliefs — such a law is blatantly unjust and should be defiantly and openly broken. As Dr. King goes on to say,

To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an 'I-it' relationship for the 'I-Thou' relationship, and ends up relegating person, to the status of things.²⁴

Clearly, for Dr. King, the basis of non-violence was not so much life, not even human life, but the total human person.

Ahimsa as Love

For Gandhiji, as we have seen, "*ahimsa* means the greatest love." True, but this negative description, like all negative descriptions, labors under a certain inadequacy. The inadequacy of a negative description stems not so much from what it says, as from what it does not say. Literally, *ahimsa* means not-hurting or not-harming. But even Gandhiji admits that it might require us to sometimes "offend... or hurt... physically" the wrong-doer. It would seem, then, that love, not *ahimsa* emerges as the ultimate norm.

Some schools of thought approve of corporal punishment for children. I do not wish to involve myself in the imbroglia over this controversial issue. What I do wish to emphasise is, were one to uphold corporal punishment for whatever reason(s), one should, at least, grant that the parent or other authoritative figure who uses it, should ensure that he/she doesn't administer the salutary spanking or caning while gripped by blind, unrestrained anger. So long as love restrains the punisher's actions, there is no danger that the child be physically scarred or beaten black and blue.

In the same way, might one not envisage a situation when one would have to use violence to restrain or incapacitate an unjust aggressor? And could one not, similarly, enjoin that, in such cases, one should so have trained oneself that it is not blind, revengeful rage that guides one, but the motivating and controlling force of love?

Is it unrealistic to imagine that love can "take charge" in such cases and ensure that the outcome of the unavoidable violence be to right the wronged

24 Luther King Jr (1973); p. 76.

due order of things and to protect the weak from the bullying tactics of the strong — not vengeance, torture and maiming? As Gandhiji once remarked, "It takes a fairly strenuous course of training to attain a mental state of non-violence."²⁵ Such a training needs be worked out for loving applications of violence (however contradictory that may sound to some ears). Many parents who physically punish their children have learnt "naturally" to do so!

Ernesto "Che" Guevera (1928–1967), perhaps the most beautiful and best loved of all revolutionaries, proposed such a vision in his *Guerrilla Warfare*. Thus, in his 38 short years of life, he made himself a legend and a hero to all idealistic youngsters the world over.

The guerrilla is seen by him as "a crusader for the people's freedom" and must need be also a man of impeccable moral conduct and strict self-control. "He must be an ascetic... and must always aid the peasant technically, economically, morally and culturally." He is to show the utmost gentleness in dealing with wounded enemy soldiers, prisoners and civilians, including those who were forced to supply food and provisions to the *Guardia Nacional*. Above all, he must be sustained by a noble ideal. "This ideal must be simple, direct, not elaborate nor visionary. But it must be so firm and so clear that a man can, without the least hesitation, sacrifice his life for it."²⁶ I do not append these lines from "Che" because I consider him as having perfectly worked out such a training programme and implemented it, but only because I want to show that a practical, down-to-earth revolutionary activist was convinced that it could be realized.

Ahimsa as Active and Courageous

It is, indeed, most significant to read that, faced with a clear choice between violence and cowardice, the Mahatma would "only prefer violence to cowardice." However, it is most disconcerting (to say the least), to note that he went on to say,

Non-violence is the summit of bravery. And, in my own experience, I have had no difficulty in demonstrating to men trained in violence the superiority of non-violence. As a coward, which I was for many years, I harboured violence. I began to prize non-violence only when I began to shed cowardice.²⁷

25 Gandhi (1968); p. 32.

26 Guevera (1981) p. 46.

27 Gandhi (1968); p. 21.

I have no difficulty in recognising that authentic non-violence calls for a kind of superlative courage. One has only to call to mind the famous Darshna Demonstration — or better still, recall that poignant and impressive scene in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* to cite but one illustrative example. But, in the text above, Gandhiji seems to be insinuating that all forms of violence, no matter what the context, are always expressions of cowardice. I cannot accept that. What would one say of the lone defender of a woman about to be gang-raped by a mob of a dozen or so soulless individuals? One man heroically stands against her would-be molesters, fighting them off in a battle he knows he will lose. Finally, he falls, battered and bleeding to his painful death and then the gang turns on the woman. Has her would-be saviour acted out of cowardice and died a coward's death?

Non-violence and Religion

Wasn't the Mahatma a bit too hasty in trying to recruit votaries of his doctrine of *ahimsa* among the eminent thinkers and religious personages of the past? Certainly, Jesus was no proto-Gandhian. Unlike Gandhiji, Jesus made liberal use of violent language and cursed his opponents roundly for their hypocrisy and injustice. He thunders forth against the Scribes and the Pharisees (Mt. 23: 13–27 is but one such instance) and called King Herod "that fox" (Lk 13: 32), an extremely insulting term, against the background of his culture. Did he not even dare to condemn his friend, Peter, as Satan (Mk. 8: 33) when the latter contradicted him on a key matter. Now, Gandhiji, as we know, called for total *ahimsa* — non-violence in thought, word and deed.

Gandhiji makes explicit reference to the "cleansing of the temple," as it is traditionally called and which is one of the few incidents in the life of Jesus that is described in all four Gospels (Mt. 21: 12–13 and parallels). It is difficult to understand how he could recognize this as an "intensely direct action," while yet classifying Jesus with the Buddha as an example of men who "would not raise a finger against their enemies." According to John's version, Jesus raised a whole whip against them (Jo 2: 15). Gandhiji also observed that Jesus and the Buddha, "even while they chastised,... showed gentleness and love behind every action." In fact, Jesus' behaviour during this incident is a good example of how love must restrain and direct violent action, as I had advocated, above. We are told that Jesus "drove them all out of the Temple, cattle and sheep as well, scattered the money changers' coins (and) knocked their tables over." (Jo 2: 15) But when he comes to the dove-sellers he does not break open their cages and lets all the birds fly away. Instead, he delivers them a gentle rebuke, "Take all this out of here and stop turning my father's house into a market." (2: 16) Jesus realized that the money-changers and the cattle-sellers, wealthy business people as they were, would easily be able to recoup

their losses for that day, whereas the impoverished dove-sellers, poor people who sold "cheap goods" to the poor, would lose their entire livelihood were he to have taken an equally violent step against their merchandise. Loving sensitivity moderated his just anger!

As for *brahmacharya*, or continence, that did not come easy to the Mahatma. After two unsuccessful attempts, he finally made a vow, in 1906 to forswear sex altogether and his wife, Kasturbai, made no protest when he informed her of this. He was to remain a faithful celibate from his thirty-seventh year, in 1906 until his tragic death in 1948.

But what was the reason for the emphasis on sexual continence, though, admittedly, *brahmacharya*, for him, involved so much more — control of one's diet, thoughts, emotions and speech? Gandhiji himself gave his reasons, but he didn't seem too sure of them, himself. At one time he said it was but his response to public duty and, on another occasion, he said it was simply that he didn't wish to have any children.²⁸ There was also the fact that Kasturbai was anemic and it could also be partly a reaction to his guilt feelings concerning his behaviour while his father was dying. But, more than all these, it was probably because he felt that loss of the seminal fluid rendered a man effete, weak and incapable of courage and self-control, necessary qualities in a votary of *ahimsa*. "Ability to retain and assimilate the vital liquid is a matter of long training," remarked Gandhiji. It is "capable of producing such a wonderful being as man. Cannot it, when properly conserved, be transmuted into matchless energy and strength?"²⁹

Gandhiji subscribed to that conviction of popular folklore and which nowadays has been shown to have no physiological or psychological basis whatsoever, namely, that sexual activity somehow diminishes one's vitality and endurance. Be that as it may, the fact that he was able to faithfully observe *brahmacharya* for almost fifty years is no mean feat of self control, as well as a testimony of that rigorous training and self-discipline an authentic follower of *ahimsa* has to undergo.

Gandhiji's reductionist view of history as a gradual but relentless march towards *ahimsa* (and, implicitly, vegetarianism) is, like all reductionist approaches, a bit too simplistic. Human social evolution is a highly complex phenomenon and moves both forwards and backwards, often in various directions at the same time and is redolent with false starts, diversions and doublings back. Witness, for instance, the observation of no less an authority than Mircea Eliade who sees violence, no less than sex, as having played a key role in the emergence and evolution of the human species. He would see

28 Fischer (1951) pp. 96—97.

29 Fischer (1951), p. 304.

homo necans (man, the killer) as much a proud ancestor of us all as *homo faber* (man, the tool-maker):

(M)an is the final product of a decision made 'at the beginning of time': the decision to kill in order to live. In short, the hominids succeeded in outstripping their ancestors by becoming flesh-eaters.³⁰

I am by no means "refuting" Gandhiji by means of a solitary quote chosen at random. However interesting the debate on this issue may be, it is quite beyond the purpose of this paper. I merely want to point out that the matter is extremely complex and one could equally propose a simplistic hypothesis from the contrary point of view!

The Body as the Root of All Evil

As soon as one accepts the dualistic understanding of the human person, one is not far from overly spiritualizing one's conception of the human person and, as a consequence, not taking very seriously our bodily needs or sufferings. A more wholesome psychological approach would be to accept the body and its emotions and needs as part and parcel of my real self and then try to work towards some kind of psycho-somatic equilibrium. A person who only listens to his/her head is as much on the road to shipwreck as one who hearkens only to his/her heart. What we need is a kind of "rational-emotive" balance in our lives, one element critiquing the other, *simultaneously*, else one would well end up as some kind of a monster with an oversized head, or a bleeding heart which calls all the shots.

No doubt, it was this negative bias against the body that led the Mahatma to counsel surrender of the Britons to the Germans, together with the possible loss of their land, property and their lives. After all, they would be holding their souls and their minds intact (whatever that would mean) and their bodies and external possessions were of no consequence whatsoever.

I am not, let me repeat, *not* advocating rank materialism and a rejection or a degrading of all that is usually encompassed under the category of spiritual. All I am saying is that *both* dimensions of the human person, the transcendent and the corporal must be taken seriously in any genuine quest for human self realization and development. Man does not live by bread *alone*; but man cannot live with absolutely no bread either!

For a lot of human beings, suffering is the law of their life. But this does not necessarily mean that it is meant to be so. We have evidence enough that

30 Eliade (1970), p. 93.

much of the hunger and poverty (deprivation would be a more accurate word) is more the result of human wickedness and selfishness than due to our helplessness and lack of natural resources. Human suffering should not be taken as a necessary evil too easily: a good deal of it is man-made, artificial, unnecessary. And, invariably the vested interests will not voluntarily relinquish what they need to satisfy their greed so that others may be able to simply live and satisfy their basic human needs. Wherever and whenever non-violence is a viable alternative it should, by all means, be bravely attempted. But when the cards are stacked against one, when the courts of law and the "public order" make it impossible for one to have a fair chance, then we have no right to always and forever counsel a person, driven frantic by the miserable and inhuman life conditions of himself/herself and his/her family to wait patiently for the oppressor's conversion of mind and heart. People who make a non-violent revolution impossible are to blame for making a violent revolution inevitable!

Non-Violence as an Absolute Requirement

In 1939, Martin Buber penned a respectful but firm reply to Gandhiji's article in the *Harijan* of the previous year and which I have quoted from in the corresponding expository section above. The great Jewish thinker's admiration for the eminent Indian is common place and has been expressed by him elsewhere.³¹

Buber begins by totally denying any parity between the situation of Indians in South Africa and that of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. He goes on to point out that the Jews had already a long history of patient suffering and injustice, borne without retaliation.

In the five years which I myself spent under the present regime, I observed many instances of genuine *satyagraha* among the Jews, instances showing a strength of spirit wherein there was no question of bartering their rights or being bowed down, and where neither force nor cunning was used to escape the consequences of their behaviour.

Such actions, however, apparently exerted not the slightest influence on their opponents. All honour, indeed, to those who displayed such strength of soul! But I cannot recognize here a maxim for the general behavior of all German Jews, which might seem suited to exert an influence on the oppressor or on the world.

31 See Buber (1968), p. 43.. Also See the article in this book, "Gandhi, Politics and Us."

Satyagraha, in short, is totally ineffective against a "diabolic human steam-roller." To persist in *satyagraha* against such odds would be sheer martyrdom — a martyrdom not without its spiritual and religious value, "a martyrdom cast to the winds" and dare anyone venture to demand it?

And then Martin Buber clarifies his stance as regards the use of violence:

We do not want force. We have not proclaimed, as you do and as did Jesus, the son of our race, the teaching of non-violence. We believe that a man must sometimes use force to save himself or, even more, his children. But from time immemorial we have proclaimed the teaching of justice and peace; we have taught and we have learned that peace is the aim of all the world and justice is the way to attain it. Thus we cannot *desire* to use force. No one who considers himself in the ranks of Israel can desire to use force....

... I cannot help withstanding evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. But if there is no other way preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God's hands.... If I am to confess what is truth to me, I must say: There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly — unless it be to love; we should be able even to fight for justice — but to fight lovingly.³²

Martin Buber expresses my own conviction perfectly. We must never *desire* violence or force. We must always seek justice, lovingly. And if necessary and when there appears to be no other way, we must fight for it, but fight lovingly!

There is only one area of disagreement that I have with the eminent Jewish thinker and that is when he agrees with Gandhi that Jesus, like the Mahatma absolutised non-violence. Nor would I go along with Gandhiji when he accuses the whole Jewish race of the murder of Jesus. One cannot blame a people for a crime which a few of their long dead ancestors, millennia ago, did! To even suggest that God would do so is to speak of a petty despot not worth the time of day!

3. Conclusion

1. I would first wish to reiterate what I had said earlier. I have nothing but admiration and respect for this great little man, already hailed in 1948 as "the most remarkable man of the century."³³ He "made humility and truth

32 See Buber (1968) p. 146; The previous reference is from p. 140 of the same book.

more powerful than empires,"³⁴ as another personage so rightly put it. If only our politicians, instead of making showy processions to Rajghat to mouth empty promises, were to imbibe some of his selfless commitment to the poorest of the poor and heed his timely guidelines, our country would be able to hold her head high in the Commonwealth of Nations. Indeed, the authentic leaders and saviors of our people, from Baba Amte, to Medha Patkar and other activists are really close to the people, not our power-hungry demagogues. Bapu would have felt more with the former than with our *netas* and *dadas*... as do our impoverished masses, who need be impoverished no more.

2. There is no need to repeat, in so many words, exactly where my disagreement with the Mahatma lies. I just briefly allude to the two areas, as I have made my position abundantly clear, above, in my opinion. (a) Jesus did not advocate or practice non-violence as Gandhiji taught it. (b) I recognize a place and a value for non-violent strategies of liberation for all time, but I would not absolutise *ahimsa* as the only *moral* remedy to fight injustice and exploitation. I would agree with Martin Buber's position as summarized above.
3. Whether one is justified in using violence or not in a given situation is frequently more a question of pragmatics than morality. As Helder Camara tells us,³⁵ even if we are quite convinced of the moral right, by giving the State an excuse to unleash a "cycle of violence" on the ill-equipped peasantry by our violence, we see their situation worsening all the more. In all events, it is the people who must decide whether they have reached a point of desperation where, whatever be the price, they can't take it any more. The case of Jayaprakash Narayan (or JP, as he was affectionately called by his followers) is significant in this regard. Once an ardent exponent of violence, he became a committed disciple of Gandhiji and non-violence. In his autobiographical, *Total Revolution*,³⁶ he tells us that his "conversion" was because he realized that, in most cases, ill-armed and untrained students and farmers were no match for well-trained troops, equipped with the latest "state of the art" weaponry. However, one should not make blanket statements about violence, condemning equally the looting, oppression and rapes perpetrated by the oppressor as well as popular use of force to resist or strike back at the aggressor, as

33 Sir Hartley Shawcross, British Attorney General, quoted by Fischer, (1951), p. 21.

34 US Senator Arthur V. Vandenburg, quoted by Fischer, (1951) p. 21.

35 Camara (1969).

36 Narayan (1975).

if both were actions of same nature as Gandhiji, we must admit, has some times done or as so many religious leaders have also declared.

4. Acts of indiscriminate terrorism, placing bombs in public places, hijackings and taking innocent hostages and the like merit unequivocal and unreserved condemnation. No action or justice can countenance such inhuman acts, any more than military or police repression of unarmed protestors can be, either.
5. Finally, I think I could find no better conclusion to this paper than the words of Einstein to bring out the eternal relevance of the message of Gandhiji's life and message:

Gandhi has demonstrated that a powerful human following can be assembled not only through the cunning game of the usual political manoeuvres and trickeries but through the cogent example of a morally superior conduct of life. In our time of utter moral decadence he was the only statesman to stand for a higher human relationship in the political sphere.³⁷

References

- Miller, Webb, *I Found No Peace, The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent*, New York: Literary Guild, 1936, p. 27.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, *All Men Are Brothers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, p. 43.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, *Non-Violent Resistance*, New York: Schocken Books, 1961, p. 14.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, (1940) *The Harijan*, July 6.
- King, Martin Luther King Jr, (1973) in *Peace and Non-Violence: Basic Writings by Prophetic Voices in the World Religions* (ed. Edward Guinan), New York: Paulist Press.
- Guevera, Ernesto "Che", (1981) *Guerrilla Warfare*, London: Collins.
- Fischer, Louis, (1951) *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, St Albans: Granada Publishing Company.
- Eliade, Mircea, (1970) *A History of Religious Ideas*, New York: Harpers.
- Buber, Martin, (1968) *Pointing the Way*, Chicago: Regnery. Also See the article in this book, "Gandhi, Politics and Us."
- Camara, Dom Helder, (1969) *Spiral of Violence*, London: Sheed & Ward.
- Narayan, Jayaprakash, (1975) *Total Revolution*, Varanasi: Sarva Sangha Prakashan.

37 Quoted by Fischer, p. 20.