

Religion, Peace and Nonviolence

Excerpts from *Truth Seekers: Voices of Peace and Nonviolence from Gandhi to Pope Francis*, ed. By David Cortright (Orbis Books, 2020).

Gandhi's commitment to pacifism and nonviolence was rooted in religious belief. He was greatly influenced by the Hindu philosophy of detachment from material wants and by the Jain tradition of the Gujarat region where he was born and raised. Jains believe in non-injury and follow a strict code of vegetarianism and pacifism.

Gandhi studied Islam and Christianity and was deeply moved by the teachings of the Gospel, particularly the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' commandment to love all including enemies. He believed in the essential unity of all the great religious traditions, seeing them as different paths leading to the same loving and merciful God.

Below are excerpts of his writings on nonviolence and peace.

Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer, but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire ...

I am not pleading for India to practice nonviolence because it is weak. I want her to practice nonviolence being conscious of her strength and power. No training in arms is required for realization of her strength. We seem to need it because we seem to think that we are but a lump of flesh. I want India to recognize that she has a soul that cannot perish and that can rise triumphant above every physical weakness and defy the physical combination of a whole world.

India considers herself to be powerless and paralyzed before the machine guns, the tanks and the airplanes of the English. And she takes up noncooperation out of her weakness. It must still serve the same purpose, namely, bring her delivery from the crushing weight of British injustice if a sufficient number of people practice it.

I isolate this noncooperation from Sinn Feinism, for it is so conceived as to be incapable of being offered side-by-side with violence. But I invite even the school of violence to give this peaceful noncooperation a trial. It will not fail through its inherent weakness. It may fail because of poverty of response. Then will be the time

for real danger. The high-souled people, who are unable to suffer national humiliation any longer, will want to vent their wrath. They will take to violence. So far as I know, they must perish without delivering themselves or their country from the wrong. ...

If India takes up the doctrine of the sword, she may gain momentary victory. Then India will cease to be the pride of my heart. I am wedded to India because I owe my all to her. I believe absolutely that she has a mission for the world. She is not to copy Europe blindly. India's acceptance of the doctrine of the sword will be the hour of my trial. I hope I shall not be found wanting. My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself. My life is dedicated to service of India through the religion of nonviolence which I believe to be the root of Hinduism.¹

They say "means are after all [just] means." I would say "means are after all everything." As the means, so the end. Violent means will give violent *Swaraj* (freedom). ... There is no wall of separation between means and end. ... I have been endeavoring to keep the country to means that are purely peaceful and legitimate.²

... If we take care of the means we are bound to reach the end sooner or later.³

War will only be stopped when the conscience of humankind has become sufficiently elevated to recognize the undisputed supremacy of the Law of Love in all the walks of life. Some say this will never come to pass. I shall retain the faith till the end of my earthly existence that it shall come to pass.⁴

... up to now experience shows that the success of violence has been short-lived. It has led to greater violence. What has been tried hitherto has been a variety of violence and artificial checks dependent mainly upon the will of the violent. At the crucial moment these checks have naturally broken down. It seems to me, therefore, that sooner or later, the European masses have to take to nonviolence if they are to find their deliverance. That there is no hope of their taking to it in a body and at once does not baffle me. A few thousand years are but a speck in the vast time circle. Someone has to make a beginning with a faith that will not flinch. I doubt not that the masses, even of Europe, will respond, but what is more emergent in point of time is not so much a large experiment in nonviolence as a precise grasp of the meaning of deliverance.

From what will the masses be delivered? It will not do to have a vague generalization and to answer 'from exploitation and degradation.' Is not the answer this that they want to occupy the status that capital does today? If so, it can be attained only by violence. But if they want to shun the evils of capital, in other words, if they would revise the viewpoint of capital, they would strive to attain a more just distribution of the products of labor. This immediately takes us to contentment and simplicity, voluntarily adopted. Under the new outlook multiplicity of material wants will not be the aim of life, the aim will be rather their restriction consistently with comfort. We shall cease to think of getting what we can, but we shall decline to receive what all cannot get.

Literally speaking, *ahimsa* means non-killing. But to me it has a world of meaning and takes me into realms much higher, infinitely higher, than the realm to which I would go, if I merely understood by *ahimsa* non-killing. *Ahimsa* really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbor an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy. Pray notice the guarded nature of this thought; I do not say 'whom you consider to be your enemy,' but 'who may consider himself to be your enemy.' For one who follows the doctrine of *ahimsa*, there is no room for an enemy; one denies the existence of an enemy. But there are people who consider themselves to be our enemies, and we cannot help that circumstance. So, it is held that we may not harbor an evil thought even in connection with such persons. If we return blow for blow, we depart from the doctrine of *ahimsa*. But I go further. If we resent a friend's action or the so-called enemy's action, we still fall short of this doctrine. But when I say we should not resent, I do not say that we should acquiesce; but by resenting I mean wishing that some harm should be done to the enemy, or that he should be put out of the way, not even by any action of ours, but by the action of somebody else, or, say, by Divine agency. If we harbor even this thought, we depart from this doctrine of *ahimsa*.

The critic regrets to see me as a politician, whereas he expected me to be a saint. Now I think that the word 'saint' should be ruled out of present life. It is too sacred a word to be lightly applied to anybody, much less to one like myself who claims only to be a humble searcher after truth, knows his limitations, makes mistakes, never hesitates to admit them when he makes them, and frankly confesses that he, like a scientist, is making experiments about some of 'the eternal verities' of life, but cannot even claim to be a scientist because he can show no tangible proof of

scientific accuracy in his methods or such tangible results of his experiments as modern science demands.

But though by disclaiming sainthood I disappoint the critic's expectations, I should have him to give up his regrets by answering him that the politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake, as I have been doing, with more or less success, consciously since 1894, unconsciously, as I have now discovered, ever since reaching the years of discretion.

Quite selfishly, as I wish to live in peace in the midst of a bellowing storm howling round me, I have been experimenting with myself and my friends by introducing religion into politics. Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.

...my critic deplores direct action. For, he says, 'it does not work for unity.' I join issue with him. Never has anything been done on this earth without direct action. I rejected the word 'passive resistance,' because of its insufficiency and its being interpreted as a weapon of the weak. It was direct action in South Africa which told and told so effectively that it converted General Smuts⁵ to sanity. He was in 1906 the most relentless opponent of Indian aspirations. In 1914 he took pride in doing tardy justice by removing from the statute book of the Union a disgraceful measure. ...

I am not a "statesman in the garb of a saint." But since Truth is the highest wisdom, sometimes my acts appear to be consistent with the highest statesmanship. But I hope I have no policy in me save the policy of Truth and Nonviolence.⁶ ...

The message of Jesus, as I understand it, is contained in his Sermon on the Mount unadulterated and taken as a whole, and even in connection with the Sermon on the Mount, my own humble interpretation of the message is in many respects different from the orthodox. The message, to my mind, has suffered distortion in the

West. ... I can tell you that in my humble opinion, much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount.⁷

Tolstoy once said that if we would but get off the backs of our neighbors the world would be quite all right without any further help from us. And if we can only serve our immediate neighbors by ceasing to prey upon them, the circle of unities thus grouped in the right fashion will ever grow in circumference till at last it is coterminous with that of the whole world. More than that it is not given to any person to try to achieve.⁸

The golden rule of conduct ... is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and that we shall always see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst, therefore, it is a good thing for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody else's freedom of conscience. ... [Mutual toleration] can be inculcated among and practiced by all, irrespective of their status and training.⁹

¹ "The Doctrine of the Sword," *Young India*, 11 August 1920; in *Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Iyer, 237-39.

² *Young India*, July 17, 1924.

³ M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1937), Chapter 3, 13.

⁴ "Nonviolence—The Greatest Force," *The Hindu*, 8 November 1926; from *Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Iyer, 240-42.

⁵ Jan Christian Smuts, a prominent political leader in South Africa, was the Colonial Secretary in Transvaal at the time of Gandhi's campaign for equal rights of Indian immigrant workers.

⁶ *Young India*, January 20, 1927.

⁷ From *Young India*, 8 December 1927; in *Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Iyer, 145-46.

⁸ "Neither a Saint nor a Politician," *Young India*, 12 May 1920; in *Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Iyer, 45-48.

⁹ *Young India*, September 23, 1926; in *Essential Gandhi*, Fischer, 213.