

Non-violence and nuclear war

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Last December a conference of the War Resister's International was held at Gandhigram in South India, which I was invited to attend. I was only able to go on the last day, but I felt that the meeting was significant both for its timing and for its setting and for the conclusions to which it came. I was glad to find that there were two or three other Catholics present, including a priest sent by his bishop from Belgium. Catholics are not generally supposed to be favourable towards pacifism, but it is obvious that the threat of nuclear war calls for a radical change in our attitude to war, and it seems inevitable that there will be an increasing number who will feel obliged to take up a pacifist position in regard at least to nuclear war. The timing of this meeting was significant because the W.R.I. is an international organization without any religious basis, yet clearly it was felt that the birth of Christ was something which is relevant to the issue which faces all men to-day, and I must say that I was impressed by the spiritual attitude which was shown by the majority of the delegates. The setting also was significant because clearly it was felt that the country of Mahatma Gandhi was the country in the world which could best be expected to offer some guidance on the supreme problem which faces our generation.

There is no doubt that the Indian background gave a very definite character to the conference. It should be explained that Gandhigram is an institution founded some years after independence to perpetuate Mahatma Gandhi's ideal of life in India. It includes schools for 'basic' education, that is education which is given through training in some form of practical work from the earliest years, and schools for training in every kind of village industry. But, of course, behind it lie the principles which governed all Mahatma Gandhi's conception of life, which he called 'truth' (*satya*) and 'non-violence' (*ahimsa*). By these words Gandhi understood something very definite. By *satya* he meant the inner voice of conscience, the inner light which guides every soul; and by *ahimsa* he meant something far more than the negative attitude which the word might seem to imply, something which was very near to the love of one's neighbour as oneself. The teaching of Gandhi was therefore based entirely on the Natural Law and this is what gives it its absolute universality.

It was interesting to find that the conference took these ideas as its basic principles and that it then went on to consider war not as an isolated phenomenon demanding a particular solution, but as part of the problem of bringing a just order into society. In regard to this it adopted the principles of the Sarvodaya movement which was founded by Gandhi and which now continues under the guidance of Vinoba Bhawe. Sarvodaya means literally 'service of all' and is the name which Gandhi gave to the movement for the regeneration of the villages of India by helping to make them self-supporting. But once again the basic principle of this movement is 'non-violence'; it is this which gives its distinctive character to everything which Gandhi undertook. Thus the conference accepted non-violence as the basic principle for human society, not merely in regard to war but also in regard to social and economic development. It is worth noting that it was led to declare that 'both the capitalist conception of private ownership and the communist conception of State ownership are insufficient where the ideal of non-violence is concerned.'

This conception of an order of society based on non-violence is surely something which deserves our serious attention. No one can pretend that a capitalist order of society, even though it is superior to a communist one, can satisfy the demands of a Christian conscience. But the more closely one examines it, the more clearly does it appear that the order which Gandhi envisaged is essentially Christian. It is true that the idea of *ahimsa* is derived from Indian tradition, not only Hindu, but also Jain and Buddhist; it is an ideal which once formulated some five hundred years before the birth of Christ, has gradually permeated the heart and mind of India. There is no doubt, either, that Gandhi's first acquaintance with *ahimsa* was through the Jain and Hindu traditions of his native Gujerat. But it is no less clear that the reading of the Sermon on the Mount and the writings of Tolstoi transformed this somewhat negative conception into a positive dynamic force in his life, which he believed was capable of transforming the world. To express his ideal of non-violent resistance he used a word *satyagraha* which means literally 'truth-force.' He sometimes also described it as 'soul-force' or 'love-force.' In this way he wanted to bring out the fact that *ahimsa* is essentially a positive force. He was strongly opposed to any idea of 'passivity' or failure to resist aggression. 'Non-violence' he once wrote, 'in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean weak submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means putting the whole of one's soul against the will of the tyrant.'

Gandhi even went to the extent of affirming several times that he would prefer people to offer violence in self-defence than weakly to give in to an aggressor. But it was his deliberate conviction that non-violence was the better way to resist evil. He believed that moral strength is always greater than physical strength and that the man who gives way to violence is morally weak. But such moral strength he believed must be based on a complete freedom from hatred. 'It is no non-violence,' he wrote, 'if we merely love those who love us. It is non-violence when we love those who hate us.' He had no illusions about the difficulty of this, but he showed in his struggle with the British in India that he was capable of carrying it out in practice.

Again he was convinced that non-violence was incompatible with fear. 'We must give up all external fears. The internal foes we must always fear. We are rightly afraid of animal passion, anger and the like. External fears cease of their own accord, once we have conquered the enemy in the camp.' Thus it is clear that the discipline of non-violence is one which demands the overcoming of passion in all its forms, fear, anger, hatred, and also lust, for Gandhi believed that *brahmacharya*, that is chastity, whether in the married or the unmarried, was a necessary condition for a *satyagrahi*. He summed the whole matter up when he said: 'Non-violence implies as complete a self-purification as is humanly possible.'

Thus far it might be said that Gandhi was following the Hindu ascetic ideal, only making it of universal application and extending it to people living in the world and exercising their political rights. But there was a further element in his conception of *ahimsa*, which seems to derive from the teaching and example of Christ alone. This was his belief in the efficacy of suffering. 'The *satyagrahi*,' he said, 'seeks to convert his opponent by sheer force of character and suffering. The purer he is and the more he suffers, the quicker the process.' That this view of the mystical value of suffering was derived from the example of Christ he showed clearly when he wrote: 'I saw that nations like individuals could only be made through the agony of the Cross and in no other way. Joy comes not out of the infliction of pain on others but out of pain voluntarily borne by oneself.' We have here, surely, the key to Gandhi's whole doctrine. He had the courage to apply to the struggle for national independence the principle of suffering for justice's sake which he saw to be the principle of the life and teaching of Christ.

It is this that gives Gandhi's teaching such an immediate relevance to our own problems. For centuries the Church has accepted the principle

that violence is a normal way of settling international disputes. Rules have been laid down, not very successfully, to limit the degree of violence which may be used, but no one has had the courage to suggest that the principle of suffering for the sake of justice which was proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount and exemplified in the Passion of Christ can be applied in the social and political world. This was what Gandhi had the courage to do and this was the method by which he won independence for India. It is only recently that a serious attempt to face the implications of Gandhi's teaching and action for the Catholic in relation to the problem of war has appeared in Père Regamey's *Non-violence et Conscience Chrétienne*. Here at last we have the principle of non-violence in its social and political implications studied by a theologian of note.

The reason why the doctrine of non-violence has so far failed to penetrate the Catholic conscience seems to be that the teaching and example of Christ in this matter are regarded as 'counsels of perfection.' They are not precepts binding on all Christians but counsels given for the benefit of a few chosen souls, which can safely be ignored by the rest. Père Regamey shows what a caricature this is of Catholic doctrine. The Christian law is not merely a set of precepts which have to be observed like the Old Law. According to St Thomas the essential difference in the New Law of the Gospel consists in the fact that it is an interior law; it is nothing less than the grace of the Holy Spirit in the heart. It is not merely a series of commands but a call to perfection. 'You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' is an exact expression of the new Law. Every Christian is thus called to perfection, to the love of God with all his heart and soul and strength and to the love of his neighbour as himself. The obligation of the Gospel, as Père Du-barle has remarked, is the obligation to respond to the love of the heavenly Father.

Thus the sayings of Jesus in the Sermon of the Mount, not to resist him who is evil, to turn the other cheek, to give away one's coat, to suffer persecution for the sake of justice, are not counsels given to a few, but the expression of principles which must govern the life of every Christian. Père Regamey further insists that these principles do not apply only to the individual. Wherever there is a human group which has been penetrated by the principles of the Gospel, the obligation exists to make these principles effective in public life. It is here that the fundamental principle which guides all Père Regamey's considerations comes out. Though the principle of non-violence, as expressed in the Sermon

on the Mount and in the example of Christ, must be a guiding principle for all Christians, it will be applied somewhat differently in the case of every individual and every group of Christians. The principle of non-violence is precisely not a law which can be applied indiscriminately on all occasions alike. It is a guiding principle which has to be applied by each person and each group of persons according to their circumstances and according to their state of conscience.

Thus ultimately it comes to this: it is a matter of the conscience of each individual person. There is no absolute rule which can be imposed, there is only a guiding principle and the inner light of the Holy Spirit to teach each person how to apply it in his life. But what is essential is that this conscience should be formed. At present it seems that very little serious attention is given to this problem. The law of non-violence, not to resist evil, to turn the other cheek, to suffer for the sake of justice, to return good for evil, to love one's enemies, is engraved in the Gospel and was proclaimed in a language which no man can misunderstand on the Cross, when God deliberately chose to overcome the powers of evil in this world not by violence or resistance of any sort but by suffering and dying. This was the example which was before the eyes of the martyrs when they without exception preferred to die rather than to offer resistance in any form. This principle was so strong in the early Church that many of the Fathers of the first three centuries regarded war as incompatible with the profession of a Christian. The changed circumstances of the fourth century led to a change in this point of view, but the continuous tradition of the Church aimed at imposing the strictest limitations on war.

Père Daniélou has argued that the circumstances of the present time compel us to re-examine our attitude to war. Just as the conscience of mankind has developed on the subject of slavery and the use of torture, which were once not only tolerated but authorized by the Church, so we may think that the threat of nuclear war is forcing us to a deeper awareness of the implications of war. It would seem that in the teaching and example of Mahatma Gandhi we have an extraordinarily penetrating light shed on this problem. The Christian conscience cannot continue to accept war on the modern scale as something which the normal Christian must accept as a duty, if he is called upon to fight for his country. It poses a problem for the conscience of every man, and the principle of non-violence as Gandhi conceived it is surely an essential element in the formation of a Christian conscience. But if our conscience forbids us to take part in total war or in the use of nuclear weapons

whose effects cannot be controlled, what alternative have we? The problem is particularly acute, because our potential enemy is one who threatens to impose a system of atheistic materialism on society, which is opposed to every Christian principle. Yet it is here surely that our faith is most clearly tested. If we believe that Christ taught us to love our enemies, to suffer violence for justice's sake rather than to inflict it on others, to overcome evil by good; and if we accept his example in suffering and dying at the hands of an alien political power without resistance, in order to establish the kingdom of God, as the pattern of life, which every Christian has to try to follow; can we refuse to believe that this faith is capable of overcoming the powers of evil in the modern world? If we need an example in the circumstances of the present day to show what such a faith can achieve, we have again the example of Gandhi both in Africa and in India, where he was able to win freedom for his people in the face of the strongest political power by the use of non-violent resistance.

These methods of 'passive resistance' are still available to us to-day, as Sir Stephen King-Hall has recently made clear. But if such methods are to have any force, as Gandhi so well understood, they must be based on a firm spiritual conviction. They cannot merely be produced in an emergency. It is here that it seems to me that the conclusions of the conference of the W.R.I. at Gandhigram are so significant. They were concerned, as I have said, not merely with resistance to war, but with the building of a non-violent order of society. Much discussion was devoted to the problem of easing tensions which may lead to war, such as racial conflicts, and it was decided to form a Peace Army, on the model of the *Shanti Sena* which Vinoba Bhave has founded in India, to attempt the work of reconciliation wherever conflicts may arise. Even more important than this was the decision to accept the principles of the *Sarvodaya* movement, so as to work for a social and economic order based neither on competitive capitalism nor on communist collectivism with their inevitable accompaniment of violence, but on free co-operation and non-violence. Such an idea may seem Utopian, yet it is hard to see what other path is open to us as Christians. If we accept the principle of non-violence as part of our commitment to the following of Christ, then we must be prepared to follow this principle in every sphere of life. It is through the growth of such 'cells' of people committed to non-violence in their daily life, that we can best hope to establish the conditions of peace. It is for each to apply the principle in his own life as best he can.