

Parallel Trajectory of Ahimsa in Gandhi and Love in Christianity

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ABSTRACT

To Gandhi, nonviolence and truth are the inseparable two sides of the same coin, that has its origin from God and it can only succeed when one has a genuine living faith in God. Ahimsa or nonviolence is an expression of love and compassion, a weapon of the strong. Similar to the need of Christians to have a living faith and dependence on God, Gandhi asserted that the success of nonviolence depended on the dependence on God by faith to practice it. By implementing the notion of love in Christianity as his method of nonviolence, Gandhi's nonviolence was a spiritual pursuit for truth as the way of life to be practice corporately on a large scale to bring integrity, justice and peace for a collective transformation in the nation. Against this backdrop, this paper intends to examine the parallel trajectory of ahimsa or nonviolence in Gandhi and love in Christianity and highlight the similarities between the two.

Keywords: Ahimsa, Faith, Love, Nonviolence, Truth

1. INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence as the path to justice, peace and God, is one of the most remarkable contributions to humanity. Gandhi stressed that nonviolence is not something which one could put on and off, like a garment but rather it has to be the very intrinsic constituent of ones being. Nonviolence and Truth are the two sides of the same coin, hence inseparable. Gandhi pursued nonviolence as the truth that has its origin from God since he believed that truth is God.ⁱ Moreover, he identified the methods of nonviolence as the force of God which are the means to sow the seed of wellbeing among the human race. Therefore, he considered it to be more powerful than the nuclear weapon.ⁱⁱ

Nonviolence being integrated with love, it is no wonder that Gandhi conceived the idea of compassionate and unconditional love from the sermon of Jesus in the Bible which says, "whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also"ⁱⁱⁱ and along the line He also preach "love your enemies."^{iv} Gandhi implemented the notion of love in Christianity in his method of nonviolence. Like the many teachings of Christianity, he also believed that the heart of the opponent could be gained by showing unconditional love towards the opponent which could cause them to repent of their wrong doings. In fact, there is also forgiveness and reconciliation on the part of love to embrace ones enemies.

Gandhi's practice of nonviolence is not only in speech, it is also in tune with his thoughts and actions. In the application of nonviolence, all kinds of differences, racism, sexism, discrimination vanishes and love prevails. He asserted that, "nonviolence succeeds only when we have a real living faith in God"^v which could probably be related to his dependence in God by faith to practice it. In fact, it can be put forward that Gandhi's nonviolence was a spiritual pursuit for truth as the way of life that was being practice not only at the individual level but on a large scale to bring integrity, justice and peace for a collective transformation in the nation.

2. AHIMSA (NONVIOLENCE)

In *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, Glyn (1991) pointed out that Gandhi's understanding of the relation of truth and Ahimsa which had its roots in his cultural and religious background, was strengthened by his reading Tolstoy's writing particularly *The Kingdom of God is within you*.^{vi} He held that nonviolence is the means and truth is the goal. According to Gandhi, there are two connotation of Ahimsa, one is positive and the other is negative.^{vii} Accordingly, the negative side of nonviolence refers to not injuring or killing of any animate beings either physically or mentally wherein, one has to abstain from harming not only in speech but also in thought and action, so that one will not cause any kind of subjective suffering that is unseen to the other beings.^{viii} For this reason, Gandhi stated that,

“I accept the interpretation of Ahimsa, namely, that it is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evildoer. But it does not mean helping the evildoers to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of ahimsa, requires you to resist the wrongdoer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offer him or injure him physically.”^{ix}

Ahimsa in its positive sense denoted promoting their well-being based on ‘infinite love’^x is love force or charity as given in the New Testament of the Bible, in the book of 1st Corinthians 13:4-7 which states that

“Love suffers long, love is kind; it is not jealous. Love does not brag and is not puffed up; it does not seek its own things; it is not provoked and does not take account of evil; it does not rejoice because of unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; it covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

As such, Ahimsa is to love not only those who love you but most importantly to love those who hate you. To love one's enemies was preached and lived out by Jesus. He even commands to pray for those who persecute you. This notion of love was endorsed by Gandhi too. Gandhi stress the need of loving one's enemies and treating them as one treat one's family and relatives.^{xi} Jesus teaching of love is reflected in the positive form of Gandhi's Ahimsa; in fact, the life of Jesus is an apparent expression of nonviolence, for with His dying breath on the Cross, He pleaded for those who persecute Him by saying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”^{xii}

Gandhi believes that Ahimsa is the law of human life and thinks that man is to live a life of nonviolence. He even insists that the purpose of man's life is to propagate Ahimsa.^{xiii} Gandhi practiced what he preached and throughout his life he unceasingly endeavored to employ nonviolence. He was perseverance in prayer and fully dependent on God in order to practice the life of Ahimsa. Likewise, Jesus lived out the life of nonviolence and preached the gospel of love. He lived what He preached by being a pattern and spread the love of God. Gandhi's technique of Ahimsa which he called Satyagraha is the positive connotation of nonviolence.^{xiv} Like the love cited in the New Testament, Ahimsa is love force that endures all things, bears no evil, never fails and it did not retaliate violence with violence. Its objective is to conquer hatred with love without coercion and not to develop a change of heart out of fear or embarrassment but with a repentance heart. For Gandhi, nonviolence is the weapon only of the strong because with the weak it might easily be a pretense.^{xv}

3. THE LAW OF LOVE IN GANDHI AND CHRISTIANITY

In *Gandhiji's Autobiography* (2009), we find that towards the end of his second year in England, Gandhi met some Christian friends who gave him the Bible to read. He said he could not possibly read through the Old Testament. But, he says, the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to his heart.^{xvi} And throughout his explanation of nonviolence he used the concept of love from the Bible wherein it mentions the unconditional love shown towards one's own enemies in order to win the hearts of the enemies. And when love is express it coincides with Gandhi's idea of active resistance where the foes' violence is resist with love.

According to Gandhi,

“The law of love will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not. Just as a scientist will work wonders out of various applications of the law of nature, even so a man who applies the law with scientific precision can work greater wonders. For the force of nonviolence is infinitely more wonderful and subtle than the material forces of nature, like, for instance, electricity. The men who discovered for us the law of love were greater scientists than any of our modern scientists.”^{xvii}

On this basis, Gandhi held that there has to be higher law than the law of destruction and this higher law he ascribed to it as the law of life. He suggested that one has to work out the law of life in daily life in order to maintain the welfare of the society. The law of life, he identified it with the law of love that would conquer the opponent when confronted.^{xviii} Gandhi believes that the law of love triumph over and against the law of destruction. Similarly, Christianity also preached to love one’s neighbor and to love one’s persecutor to the extent of even praying for their well being.^{xix} When love prevails as the positive form of resistance, its offshoot is peace and harmony.

In *My Faith in Nonviolence*, Gandhi concluded that the law of love is the rule of mankind without which there will be the extinction of mankind due to hatred that will instigate violence. Gandhi put forth that to practice nonviolence one needs a rigorous training like in the life of soldier.^{xx} He further emphasized that one has to practice nonviolence not only in words but also in thought and deeds otherwise it will be a mere show without the reality of it.

In relation to Nonviolence as the expression of love, Gandhi stated that

“Non violence resistance can only follow some real disinterested service, some heart-expression of love. For instance, I would have no status to resist a savage offering animal sacrifice until he could recognize in me his friend through some loving act of mine or other means.”^{xxi}

Therefore, to change the heart of the opponent one has to evince love. This love will cause the adversary to admit the wrong doings he committed and be remorseful for it.

For Gandhi, one who practices nonviolence should have the capacity to forgive the wrong doings of the adversary which is why he stated that nonviolence is not for a coward.^{xxii} In his opinion, revenge is committed out of fear of harm and therefore forgiveness is for the brave who practice nonviolence. In the same way, the love in Christianity also includes the willingness to forgive after the repentance of heart just like God forgiving the sinners.^{xxiii} Hence, love bears no evil and it embraces the enemy with forgiveness when he expiate of his wrong doings.

Gandhi also stressed that nonviolence which is the love force is to soften the heart of the adversary and make him realize of his wrong doings. By treating him like family or close relatives, the adversary atones and make up his mind not to commit it again. Thus, compassion in Gandhi’s nonviolence like love in Christianity opens a room for the opponent to amend of his wrong doings.

To illustrate the compassion in Gandhi and love in Christianity, it would be appropriate to quote Gandhi. He claims that,

“Though I cannot claim to be a Christian in the sectarian sense, the example of Jesus’ suffering is a factor in the composition of my undying faith in non violence which rules all my actions worldly and temporal. And I know that there are hundreds of Christians who believe likewise. Jesus lived and died in vain, if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love.”^{xxiv}

From this quotation it can be pointed out that Gandhi admitted that his relentless faith in the pursuit of nonviolence was enhanced by the sufferings of Jesus in His humanity. He acknowledged that Jesus long suffering reign in him as the element of his enduring faith in all his activities physically and spiritually. Besides, he approved that the unending love promulgated by Jesus constrained his entire life. And that without this love, the life and death of Jesus on this earth would be futile. In other words, it can put forth that Gandhi tried to amalgamate the Christian law of love with Ahimsa.

To elucidate the relation of the law of love in Gandhi and Christianity, it would be pertinent to highlight Luther’s portrayal of Gandhi’s concept of love in nonviolence. He stated that,

“Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale...”^{xxv}

He was profoundly impressed that Gandhi has changed his whole concept of love in Christianity. Initially, Luther used to conceive that gospel of love in the Bible is applicable only at an individual level and that it cannot be enforced at an extensive level. But Gandhi had completely torn down his narrow concept of love by being a living example in carrying out his nonviolence of love. It was in Gandhi's compassion in Ahimsa that he began to believe in social reformation where love serves as a powerful instrument. King even observed that, “Christ furnished the spirit and the motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.”^{xxvi}

Rudolph (2006) in *Postmodern Gandhi* ascribed that Gandhi was the most influential teacher of ethics in history that transcends caste, creed, race and nation and he is being considered as comparable to Buddha, Mohammed, and, particularly for Christians, Jesus.^{xxvii} Gandhi practiced nonviolence irrespective of time and space and applies it in his daily experiences without fail. He became a living example of nonviolence that he can be considered as equivalent to the prominent saints of different religions. Pope John Paul II's who visited India told a reporter of *The New York Times*, that

“I was there to evangelize I have evangelized the Indian people through the works of Mahatma Gandhi. He was much more of a Christian than many people who say they are Christians.”^{xxviii}

From the above lines one can assume that, Gandhi was seen as a Christian apostle who spread the compassion of Jesus in nonviolence. In applying nonviolence he was not disheartened even if the consequences do not favor Ahimsa. He persistently carried out nonviolence like Jesus who did not stop manifesting love even to those who betrayed him. Instead, He asked the Father to forgive them and prayed for them. Kenneth Scott Latourette in his 1953 *A History of Christianity* argued that through Gandhi,

“the influence of Christ ... became more dominant in ... (India) than at any previous time. Through Gandhi, the teaching and example of Jesus made for non-violent resistance, greater opportunity to the depressed classes, and the positive meanings of unselfish service.”^{xxix}

Andrew in *What I Owe to Christ* has written that, he saw the living out of true Christianity in Gandhi's living of nonviolence. He said Gandhi adopted the true Christian life by enduring wrong doing unwearingly and surmount evil with good whereby expressing compassion. Andrew further mentioned that he is entirely ‘Hindu’ yet so supremely ‘Christian’. He also pointed out that there seems to be an organic unity in both of the religions. In Andrews' view, the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus was lived out by Gandhi. And he believed that Gandhi's Satyagraha, or Truth Force, was evidently Christian.^{xxx}

Gandhi has given implications and conditions on the success of non violence which has striking similarities with the life of Jesus.^{xxxi} Firstly, non violence is the law of the human race and is infinitely greater than and superior to brute force. The law of non violence as suggested by Gandhi can be seen in Jesus life, for instance, he rebuke one of His disciple for cutting the ear of the soldier who came to imprison Him.^{xxxii} This incidence clearly indicates violence is repudiated by Jesus. Secondly, nonviolence does not avail to those who do not possess a living faith in the God of love. Likewise, a Christian life is a dependent life on God. By having faith in God he can love all mankind. Thirdly, individual or nations who would practice non violence must be prepared to sacrifice their all except honor. Jesus sacrifices Himself for the sins of the world by taking up the cross to be crucified.^{xxxiii} To be a follower of Jesus, one should have the compliance to suffer for the sake of gaining a lost soul. Fourthly, nonviolence is a power which can be wielded equally by all; children, young, men and women, provided they have a living faith in the God of love and therefore have equal love for all mankind. This love will in turn cause a person to live a life of nonviolence which can be acquired by everyone, male or female, young or old.

Gandhi held that “when non violence is accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts.”^{xxxiv} This law of life, as mentioned earlier, is the law of love.

Nonviolence which is the law of life, as put forth by Gandhi, should permeate and saturate one's entire being that there will not be autonomous act outside this law of life. In fact, he stated that man have an inherent nature which he refers to the law of life that needs to be exercised or practiced daily. And by living according to the law of life, man's purpose of life is fulfilled. In the same way, love is the main feature in living the life of a Christian. Love has to be the primary source in worshipping God, in serving God, in preaching the gospel and in gaining the unbelievers. Without the law of love operating in a Christian life, the belief system will collapse. Apart from love, all the services to God done by a believer are meaningless. The main teaching of Jesus is love which is the very intrinsic constituent of a Christian like Gandhi's nonviolence.

4. CONCLUSION

Chakrabarty (2006) rightly put forth that, "For Gandhi, Ahimsa meant "both passive and active love, refraining from causing harm and destruction to living beings as well as positively promoting their well-being." This suggests that by Ahimsa, Gandhi did not mean merely 'non-injury' to others in a mere negative or passive connotation; rather, Ahimsa had a positive or active meaning of love and charity."^{xxxv} According to Gandhi, love or compassion is an active resistance of violence and to exercise it, one has to undergo a laborious training. The impact of love is more powerful than the so-called nuclear weapon because using of brute force will ignite more anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, and selfishness which result in devastation. Whereas the outcome of love will thaw the stony heart of the foes, conquer them with love, resist evil with good and that will bring in peace, justice and bring one closer to God. The love that Gandhi used in nonviolence is analogous to the concept of love in Christianity as preached by Jesus while living on this earth. The love that Jesus lived out has the element of long suffering, patience, forgiveness, kindness, and truthfulness. These qualities of love can never be possessed by a person who employs violence. It is strictly own by a nonviolence practitioner and it is carried out in thoughts, words and deeds.

To conclude, from the study of Gandhi's Ahimsa and Love in Christianity, the law of love can be seen both in the life of Jesus as well as in Gandhi, who were both courageous to exercise it even at the cost of their lives. Similarly they both had a living faith in God and were men of prayer. They were spiritual figures who depended on God to live the way of life by taking the path of self denial. By living out what they preached, both of them were a pioneer in bringing in individual as well as collective transformation. Thus, one cannot deny the fact that there exist a parallel trajectory in Gandhi's Ahimsa and love in Christianity.

Notes

ⁱ Dear. *The experiment of Gandhi: Nonviolence in the Nuclear age*. p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p.24

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Mathew 5:39.

^{iv} *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Mathew 5:44.

^v Dear. *Mahatma Gandhi, Apostle of Nonviolence: An Introduction*. p. 12.

^{vi} Richards. *The Philosophy of Gandhi*. p. 33.

^{vii} Ibid.p.34

^{viii} Ibid.p.34

^{ix} Gandhi. "Love" in *The Class of Nonviolence*. p. 45

^x Chakrabarty. *Social and Political thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. p.60.

^{xi} Gandhi. *All Men are Brothers*, p. 86.

^{xii} *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Luke 23:24.

- xiii Richards. *The Philosophy of Gandhi*. p. 34.
 xiv Ibid. p. 48.
 xv Ibid. p.50.
 xvi Gandhi. *Gandhiji's Autobiography*. p. 50.
 xvii Gandhi. "My Faith in Nonviolence" in *The Class of Nonviolence* p. 43.
 xviii Ibid.
 xix *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Luke 6:27, 35.
 xx Gandhi. "My Faith in Nonviolence" in *The Class of Nonviolence*. p. 43.
 xxi Gandhi. *Nonviolence in Peace and war*. Vol. I. p. 76.
 xxii Ibid. p. 64
 xxiii *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, 1 John 1:9.
 xxiv Gandhi. *Nonviolence in Peace and war*. Vol. I. p.192.
 xxv Dear. *Mahatma Gandhi, Apostle of Nonviolence: An Introduction*. p. 26.
 xxvi Ibid. pp.26-27.
 xxvii Rudolph. *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*. p.116.
 xxviii Ibid.
 xxix Ibid. p.117.
 xxx Gorringer, "Gandhi and Christian Community", p.158.
 xxxi Gandhi. *Non-violence in Peace and War*.Vol. I. p.127.
 xxxii *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Mathew 26: 47-56.
 xxxiii *The Holy Bible, New Testament*, Mark 15:21-41, John 19: 17-37.
 xxxiv Gandhi. *Non-violence in Peace and War*.Vol. I. p.127.
 xxxv Chakrabarty. *Social and Political thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. p. 59.

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