

## Philosophy of Nonviolence

**T**hese notes - which will stretch over several issues of [Nonviolence Web Upfront], and take the place of the usual "Op Ed" pieces - are an effort to summarize the basic philosophy of nonviolence. (They might be the basis of a pamphlet when done; revised, condensed, etc.). We write and talk about nonviolence as if it were simply a technique. I believe it is much more, that it is a "one-edged philosophy" which cannot easily be used to defend or advance injustice, and which is of value only if tested in the real world.

When I came into the pacifist movement in 1948 the concept of nonviolence as a method of change was new to the United States, the direct result of Gandhi's teachings *and actions* in India. Historically nonviolence had been seen either as an expression of the Gospels, or as a variant on the stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius. But neither the Christian nor the stoic teachings gave us a method to deal with injustice except through endurance. This was fine if I was the one suffering, but it did not provide a way to stop you from inflicting injustice on a third party. The Christian could choose to endure great injustice - but what of the non-Christian who had done nothing to merit the suffering, and sought relief from it?

### THE PROBLEM OF DEALING WITH EVIL

Particularly after World War II with the horror of the mass killing, there was a sense that pacifism alone - the refusal to kill - was not good enough. Communism offered one answer but, as expressed by Lenin and Trotsky, it was an answer in which the end justified the means and by 1945 it was clear that, at best, Communism was a "lesser evil" than Fascism. Into this vacuum, this "historic place" where we found ourselves confronted by the reality that men such as Hitler and Stalin existed, that the atom bomb was possibly a final step in human history, the pacifist movement embraced what we call today "Nonviolence" as opposed to the earlier word "pacifism".

And it was here that I entered the pacifist movement, as old ideas and new ones were explored and tested. It was one of the twists of history that when nonviolence did re-enter American life, it was returning home. Henry David Thoreau's essay on Civil Disobedience had been read by Tolstoy, Tolstoy had been read by Gandhi, and Gandhi had been read by Martin Luther King Jr. It was an ideology which had been around the world, affecting and being affected by all it encountered.

### THERE IS NO IDEOLOGY WITHOUT HOLES

In trying to understand the philosophy of nonviolence, it is important to keep in mind *there is no living, vital philosophy which does not have "holes" in it*. Let me give two examples. Marxism (and I am heavily indebted to Marx) has an inherent contradiction in that it argued "history is on our side, socialism is inevitable, the result of contradictions which will lead to the collapse of capitalism". Fine, if socialism is inevitable, then why not sit back and wait for it? Why risk one's life - as so many courageous socialists and communists did - in a struggle, the end of which was already certain?

Buddhism, to which I am also personally indebted, tells us that Buddha sat under a tree, meditated, and discovered the truth, a large part of which was non-attachment. Why then did he bother to teach it? If Buddha had gained the answer, why was he still so "attached to the world" that he taught at all? In both cases I have heard the answers - they do not persuade me. Philosophies, those which can change the course of lives, and alter history, are marked by contradictions. Only minor ideologies have all the answers.

Nonviolence does not answer all questions. It is filled with contradictions. My own grasp of nonviolence is a blend of things I have read in Gandhi, heard from Bayard Rustin and A. J. Muste, from reading Eastern philosophy, the gospels, Karl Marx, etc. This is an effort to outline what I have learned, knowing there is not a single idea here which is original with me.

## **A BASIC ASSUMPTION OF NONVIOLENCE**

Let's begin with a basic assumption of nonviolence. There is an absolute reality, but none of us are absolutely certain what it is. Each of us sees part of it, none of us can grasp all of it. Let's think of reality - the "real world" - as the earth itself. If we ask a handful of widely scattered people what the "reality of the earth is", the man who lives on a small island in the Pacific will say it is almost entirely water, except for the patch of land on which he and his family live. A woman in Kansas will say it is flat, dry except when it rains, and is covered by wheat. The nomad in the Sahara desert will say the earth is dry, sandy, constantly moving with the wind, and there is little vegetation. The hunter in the Brazilian rain forest will insist the earth is wet with water, the air is thick with moisture, the day is filled with the sounds of birds and insects, and the vegetation so dense that it is hard to move.

**Each statement is true - as a part of the truth. None of the statements is true of the whole.** Yet we often believe the partial truth we perceive is the full truth. Put it another way - each human being perceives "reality" in different ways. For most of us that difference is so slight we don't notice it. But the matter is important when a person is color blind and cannot distinguish between red and green - which is why STOP signs say STOP and do not just flash red (it is also why the red is the top color of traffic lights, and green the bottom one - a person who is color blind can still tell the difference by their position). Someone who, from birth, is deaf or blind lives in a world as "real" as the one you live in, but their "reality" will be profoundly different.

We are, each of us, finite beings in a universe which, so far as we can know, is infinite. Whether the universe had a beginning and an end we are not sure - but we are certain we had a beginning and we all know we will have an end. There is a limit to the time during which we can learn things - and there are far too many things to learn for any of us ever to be sure we are an authority except - at best - in small and limited ways.

We may be absolutely certain - as I am - that behind the illusions of a solid world (an illusion, because the solid world is made up of impossibly small ticks of energy bound together in such a way as to give the illusion of being chairs, tables, people, etc.) there is some "reality." But I am absolutely certain, because I am finite and the true reality is infinite, that I can never be absolutely certain of anything being absolutely true. I believe there is truth, but I do not believe I will ever be certain of it.

### **WHERE DOES THIS NONSENSE LEAD US?**

This all seems terribly convoluted but let's look at Gandhi, who said "Truth is God, God is Truth". His Autobiography was titled "My Experiments with Truth". It is easy to miss the edge of what Gandhi was saying, because it was so obvious. Asked by a Westerner if he believed in God, Gandhi replied "God is even in these stones", tapping a stone. This is part of a Hindu belief that God is not, as in the West, separated and apart from us, personal and yet distant - rather, God is impersonal and pervades everything. The line between this belief and a kind of religious atheism is hard to draw. In the Hindu sense "God *is all things*". So that when Gandhi said "God is Truth" it was a statement a scientist might understand with greater immediacy than the rest of us.

For me there has always been a link between this and Marx's thought, in which the entire body of Marxism was built up by observation of the material world, by a search for the facts, by a determination that theories had to reflect the "material reality". Both Karl Marx and Mohandas Gandhi spent a great deal of time trying to find out what the concrete facts were about situations.

Marx did his work among stacks of books in the British Museum. Gandhi looked over reports, read statistics, listened to peasants, sought the *truth* before reaching a conclusion. Neither man sat alone, meditated, and waited for truth to arrive on the wings of pure logic. No - truth was determined by observation. There is to Gandhi something of the pure scientist, the physicist, willing to test his observations.

### **THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH AS COMMON GROUND**

And if Gandhi's search for truth saw "God as Truth", then it is possible for the "non-believer" to approach Gandhi, with the search for truth as a common ground. But - and we will return to this again and again - because Gandhi was aware that he could not be *certain that he was right*, he was not willing to destroy others in his test of truth. Himself, yes, but not others. He was aware (and Marxists tend not to be) that his perception of reality was always, and by the nature of things, "partial and incomplete". And he knew

that his opponent also saw a part of the true reality. This is terribly hard for us to admit or recognize. The General sees a part of reality? Nixon saw a part of reality? Yes.

Let me close this first "chapter" by noting that one of the things which most deeply impressed me about the late A.J. Muste was his ability to *listen with respect* to those with whom he deeply disagreed, *not as a tactic but because he hoped to catch in their remarks some truth he himself had missed*. Most of us, in arguing, can hardly wait for our "opponent" to finish so that we can "correct" him (or her).

A.J. was in no hurry to "correct" his opponent, nor was Gandhi. Nonviolence is many things, but if it is not a search for truth - a search that is never ended - it will fail.