

Understanding Some Misunderstandings of Gandhi (Including Perspectives on Terrorism)

*** based upon a presentation by Michael Sonnleitner at Quaker Meeting House in Ramallah, Palestine, on July 1, 2010, sponsored by FICR (the Friends International Center in Ramallah). Michael Sonnleitner has his Ph.D. in Political Science, Chairs the Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) Program at Portland Community College (in Portland, Oregon, U.S.A.), and was a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar teaching Gandhian Thought in India for 6 months (2009-2010). His study of Gandhi spans a period of over 40 years.**

At least three major misunderstandings of Gandhi contribute to most people not understanding his perspectives regarding terrorism. These misunderstandings include the notions that: 1) Gandhi was always consistent in his vision of Truth, 2) Gandhi's commitment to Nonviolence led him to condemn all violence, and 3) Gandhi is not very relevant today because his emphasis upon Voluntary Suffering could not be successful used against opponents less civilized than the British. As I now briefly discuss his concepts of Truth, Nonviolence, and Voluntary Suffering, it will become clear that Gandhi both condones and condemns terrorism at the same time, under different circumstances. One insight should emerge clearly: Gandhi always stood with those he believed to be oppressed and encouraged them to act according to their own view of what is true, using such strategies to alleviate their suffering as makes sense to them.

For Gandhi the concept of ``truth`` (*sat* in Sanskrit) is both absolute and relative at the same time. Rejecting the more typical either-or logical orientation of western culture, for example, Gandhi asserted that we are all (throughout our lives, between birth and moment of death) engaged in both violence and nonviolence. Absolute Truth (which is God, (that may set one free of all misunderstandings) can only be achieved at the point of death if (like Jesus on the Cross) if we can die with an attitude of love towards all life, including even those who may be killing us. Such perfect nonviolence is, for him, the only means by which perfect Truth can be obtained: It is like an apple seed that becomes an apple tree; the means of nonviolence become the end that is Truth.

While our soul is in its material body, we are always engaged in some *himsa* (injury or harm in Sanskrit). This is not only because we may be unintentionally stepping on an insect or intentionally eating meat or even a peanut ripped from the ground. It is also because of our tendency to make absolute our particular view of what is true and insist upon others agreeing with us! Gandhi adopts the Jain concept of *ahimsa* (non-injury or harmlessness) and its associated concept of *anekantavada* (the many-sidedness of Truth) as integral to his vision of nonviolence. As in the story of the four blind men and the elephant (with which he was familiar), we all both see the Truth and do not see it, at the same time: One blind man holds the elephant's tail and claims it to be like a rope; another touched its body and asserts it to be like a water tank; another embraces a leg and says the elephant is like a tree trunk; while the fourth blind man grabs the ear and

insists it to be similar to a banana leaf!

The point of the story is clear: we are all blinded by our particular culture, our gender, our experiences -- and so need the humility to understand our need to listen to other blind people. Together, through the communication (of our relative truths), we may progressively be able to put together a fairly complete picture of the elephant (the absolute Truth). Nonviolence is a required means, in this context, since to threaten injury to others harms our ability to communicate with them, thereby limiting our own ability to understand Truth more fully. Such lack of communication and the violence which results from our insisting that others must only agree with us, Gandhi suggests, is the primary cause of the involuntary human suffering existing all around us (from economic exploitation and racism, to social inequality and sexism).

Gandhi never sought to be consistent with his view of Truth (*Sat*) over time. His nonviolence (*ahimsa*) required that he seek to learn about any particular situation from multiple points of view (always listening to the other blind persons, including his opponents). This attitude breeds both personal humility as well as respect for disagreement. He accepts that while there are only degrees of understanding of Truth at any point in time, there are also only degrees of Nonviolence that we may manifest while living in this world. Our duty is to hold firm to the truth as we may presently understand it to be and then hold firm to a more clear vision as we learn more information from others. This is the way of satyagraha (the concept Gandhi created to describe his nonviolent action approach: literally ``holding firm to truth``). The more *ahimsa* we manifest in relation to others (ideally conditioning ourselves to not even think of doing harm to them), the greater will be our understanding of that which is True (the elephant, God, the Universe).

So, from a Gandhian perspective, we both know Truth (a part of it) and do not at the same time (since we cannot see it all due to our life circumstances). We must both seek to be Nonviolent and, at the same time, recognize that we always (while living) engage in some violence. Violence and nonviolence, for Gandhi, is not seen in either/or categories: We are always involved in both violence and nonviolence at the same time -- it is all a matter of degree. It is in this context that he asserts the worst violence to be cowardly non-action: to be frozen in a fear which harms not only our self-respect, but our respect for the Self that is our soul -- the life-force that is God within us. For Gandhi, a strategy of terrorism, adopted as a means of liberating the oppressed, is more nonviolent than the dehumanizing non-action of one ruled by fear: a terrorist cultivates both courage and self-discipline -- and is willing even to die in service to those who are desperately suffering injustice. These are qualities needed also in regular soldiers (who exhibit more nonviolence by restricting who they target), as well as in nonviolent soldiers (who must be willing to die, but not to kill any others).

Rather than simplistically condemning terrorism, Gandhi complements the terrorist who shows courage in fighting for justice, and encourages a consideration of more nonviolent alternatives. Yet it is for them to hold firm to Truth as they see it, and to decide what strategies to adopt in their own liberation. If those advocating greater

nonviolence (like Gandhi himself) are unable to offer such nonviolent alternatives themselves (by putting their own lives on the line), Gandhi would condone even terrorism rather than condemn it outright. For him even extreme violence utilized by the oppressed is more nonviolent than the violence of the oppressor -- and is certainly more nonviolent than the non-action of those controlled by fear. Gandhi is no passivist: he believes in action (the more nonviolent, as a matter of degree, the better).

Is Gandhi relevant today? His personal advocacy of Voluntary Suffering (*Tapas* in Sanskrit) is often rejected as impractical against opponents capable of great brutality. Rather than discuss how much more civilized British colonialism was as compared to Nazi imperialism, Gandhi would have us ask a simpler question: Does the Law of Karma exist? As an empirical matter, is there a pervasive reality of cause and effect which pervades material reality? Do we as a society (over time) reap what we sow? Gandhi would assert that what is won by physical force can only be kept by physical force; that dictatorship cannot promote democracy; that a mother cannot save her child by killing it. For him, the levels of Truth that obtainable by degrees of Nonviolence inevitably require Voluntary Suffering. As Buddha said; ``Hate cannot destroy hate, only love can destroy hate``. The cycles of karmic violence (you hit me, so I will hit you) can reinforce violent retaliation over generations (an eye for an eye leaving the whole world blind).

To stop any cycle of violence (among individuals, groups, or nation-states), Gandhi suggests, means that at some point, someone, must say no: I will not retaliate. I will actively subvert the cycle of violence by refusing to cooperate with it. I will voluntarily suffer the hatred of my opponent and forgive the violence they may continue to use against me -- though I will also actively refuse to obey their unjust actions and policies. Power is a relationship which can be broken as soon as I empower myself to suffer and die as may be necessary. If we rule ourselves no one can rule over us. They may kill us, but not make us undertake any action against our will. Sooner or later, Gandhi believes, by sowing love for those in the human family who oppress others, our love which voluntarily suffers their violence will touch their hearts and they will see that we are all, in fact, members of humankind.

Can we use soul-force to help other blind people to see how wrong they are in making their own Truth absolute with a willingness to harm us for its sake? Gandhi says YES. If ours is a higher Truth, though it be crushed to earth, it will rise again. The sacrifice of the suicide bombers can be appreciated, in this context, as they are willing to die for what they believe. Their challenge to us should be to ask whether we are willing to die for what we believe, but not be willing to kill? Rather than simply condemn terrorism as a strategy often used for the liberation of oppressed, our task is to creatively develop viable alternatives that utilize greater nonviolence. For Gandhi, what is viable is largely a function of how much we are willing to sacrifice (voluntarily suffer). As a mother is willing to die for her child, he hopes that we may be willing to overcome our fears and live in such a way as to give birth to a better world.