

Gandhi and the Sermon on the Mount  
(Dr. Christian Bartolf)

*For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal;  
For a kindly greeting, bow thou down with zeal;  
For a simple penny, pay thou back with gold;  
If thy life be rescued, lives do not withhold;  
Thus, the words and actions of the voice regard;  
Every little service tenfold they reward.  
But the truly noble know all men as one,  
And return with gladness good for evil done.*

Shamal Bhatt (a Gujarati poet from the eighteenth century)

When during his student days in London, Young law student Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi met a good Christian from Manchester in a vegetarian boarding house, he accepted his advice to read the Bible, because Gandhi learnt that neither eating meat nor drinking alcohol was enjoined by Scripture. "I began reading it, but I could not possibly read through the Old Testament. I read the book of Genesis, and the chapters that followed invariably sent me to sleep."

"But the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the *Gita*. The verses, 'But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloak too,' delighted me beyond measure and put me in mind of Shamal Bhatt's 'For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal', etc. My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the *Gita*, *The Light of Asia* and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly."<sup>1</sup>

This reading whetted my appetite for studying the lives of other religious teachers. [...]"

The ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus Christ strongly resemble the principles behind the non-violent resistance developed by Mahatma Gandhi, which he called satyagraha ("firmness in truth"): "I can say that I have profited much by a prayerful reading of the Sermon on the Mount. I regard Jesus to have been one of the greatest teachers of the world. I do not believe in his exclusive divinity."<sup>2</sup>

When Gandhi left Italy in December 1931, he was still under the impression of his visit to the St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. On board S.S. "Pilsna", he gave a talk at 4.30 a.m. Half a dozen persons attended<sup>3</sup>:

"I shall tell you how, to an outsider like me, the story of Christ, as told in the New Testament, has struck. My acquaintance with the Bible began nearly forty-five years ago, and that was through the New Testament. I could not then take much interest in the Old Testament, which I

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<sup>1</sup> M. K. Gandhi: An Autobiography – Part I, Chapter XX: Acquaintance with Religions; Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 39, p. 61

<sup>2</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Letter to Martin C. Miller, Sabarmati, May 2, 1931; Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 46, p. 71

<sup>3</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Talk on board S.S. "Pilsna", December 25, 1931, Young India, 31-12-1931; Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 48, pp. 437-439

had certainly read, if only to fulfil a promise I had made to a friend whom I happened to meet in a hotel. But when I came to the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount, I began to understand the Christian teaching, and the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount echoed something I had learnt in childhood and something which seemed to be part of my being and which I felt was being acted up to in the daily life around me.

I say it seemed to be acted up to, meaning thereby that it was not necessary for my purpose that they were actually living the life. This teaching was non-retaliation, or non-resistance to evil. Of all the things I read what remained with me for ever was that Jesus came almost to give a new law-though He of course had said He had not come to give a new law, but tack something on to the old Mosaic law. Well, He changed it so that it became a new law-not an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but to be ready to receive two blows when one was given, and to go two miles when you were asked to go one.

I said to myself, "This is what one learns in one's childhood. Surely this is not Christianity." For, all I had then been given to understand was that to be a Christian was to have a brandy bottle in one hand and beef in the other. The Sermon on the Mount, however, falsified the impression.

As my contact with real Christians, i.e., men living in fear of God, increased, I saw that the Sermon on the Mount was the whole of Christianity for him who wanted to live a Christian life. It is that Sermon which has endeared Jesus to me.

I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it was proved by someone that the man called Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the Gospels was a figment of the writer's imagination. For the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for me.

Reading, therefore, the whole story in that light, it seems to me that Christianity has yet to be lived, unless one says that where there is boundless love and no idea of retaliation whatsoever, it is Christianity that lives. But then it surmounts all boundaries and book-teaching. Then it is something indefinable, not capable of being preached to men, not capable of being transmitted from mouth to mouth, but from heart to heart. But Christianity is not commonly understood in that way.

Somehow, in God's providence, the Bible has been preserved from destruction by the Christians, so-called. The British and Foreign Bible Society has had it translated into many languages. All that may serve a real purpose in the time to come. Two thousand years in the life of a living faith may be nothing. For though we sang, "All glory to God on high and on the earth be peace," there seems to be today neither glory to God nor peace on earth.

As long as it remains a hunger still unsatisfied, as long as Christ is not yet born, we have to look forward to Him. When real peace is established, we will not need demonstrations, but it will be echoed in our life, not only in individual life, but in corporate life. Then we shall say Christ is born. That to me is the real meaning of the verse we have sung. [The proceedings had opened with the singing of a hymn celebrating Christ's Nativity: "While shepherds watched their flocks by night".] Then we will not think of a particular day in the year as that of the birth of Christ, but as an ever-recurring event which can be enacted in every life.

And the more I think of fundamental religion, and the more I think of miraculous conceptions of so many teachers who have come down from age to age and clime to clime the more I see that there is behind them the eternal truth that I have narrated. That needs no label or declaration. It consists in the living of life, never ceasing, ever progressing towards peace.

When, therefore, one wishes "A Happy Christmas" without the meaning behind it, it becomes nothing more than an empty formula. And unless one wishes for peace for all life, one cannot wish for peace for oneself. It is a self-evident axiom, like the axioms of Euclid, that one cannot have peace unless there is in one an intense longing for peace all round. You may certainly experience peace in the midst of strife, but that happens only when to remove strife you destroy your whole life, you crucify yourself.

And so, as the miraculous birth is an eternal event, so is the Cross an eternal event in this stormy life. Therefore, we dare not think of birth without death on the Cross. Living Christ means a living Cross. Without it life is a living death.”

As early as 1907, Gandhi’s projection for the Indian “passive resisters” was the imitation of “Gentle Jesus, the greatest passive resister the world has seen” – as “their pattern”<sup>4</sup>:

“Indians who migrated to this country in search of an honest livelihood, and who find themselves face to face with civic and social extinction, are fighting under the inspiration of the New Testament. Gentle Jesus, the greatest passive resister the world has seen, is their pattern. [...]

Was not Jesus rejected and yet did He not resist the blasphemy that His persecutors would have Him utter on pain of suffering what was, in their estimation, an inglorious death, side by side with thieves and robbers? But the crown of thorns today sits better on that bleeding head than a crown bedecked with diamonds of the purest water on any sovereign. He died indeed, yet He lives in the memory of all true sons of God, and with Him live also the thieves who accepted the humble Nazarene and His teaching.

So, too, will Indians of the Transvaal, if they remain true to their God, live in the memory of their children and their countrymen who will be able to say, after they have left this transient world, 'Our forefathers did not betray us for a mess of pottage.'”

Gandhi wrote about the “golden rule of conduct”<sup>5</sup>:

“The golden rule of conduct, therefore, is mutual toleration seeing that we will never all think alike, and 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 guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody else’s freedom of conscience. [...]

Now the etymological meaning of conscience is ‘true knowledge’. The dictionary meaning is ‘faculty distinguishing between right and wrong and influencing conduct accordingly’. Possession of such a faculty is possible only for a trained person, that is, one who has undergone discipline and learnt to listen to the inner voice. But even amongst the most

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<sup>4</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Staggering Humanity, Indian Opinion, 27-7-1907; in: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 7, p. 119

<sup>5</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Religion of Volunteers; Young India, 23 September 1926, in: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 31, pp. 441f.

conscientious persons, there will be room enough for honest differences of opinion. The only possible rule of conduct in any civilized society is therefore mutual toleration. It can be inculcated among and practised by all irrespective of their status and training.”

Before his 1931 trip to Europe, Gandhi was asked in a press interview<sup>6</sup>:

“Q. Do you think the League of Nations will succeed in exterminating war?

A. War will never be exterminated by any agency until men and the nations become more spiritual and adopt the principle of brotherhood and concord rather than antagonism, competition, and brute force. Those in the West do not recognize the power of spiritual things, but some day they will and then they will be free from war, crimes of violence and things that go with these evils. The West is too materialistic, selfish and narrowly nationalistic.

What we want is an international mind, embracing the welfare and spiritual advancement of all mankind.

Q. How would you cure the evil of armaments?

A. By non-violence, which will eventually be the weapon of all nations. I say 'eventually' deliberately, because we shall have wars and armaments for a very long time. It is two thousand years since Christ preached His Sermon on the Mount and the world has adopted only a fragment of the imperishable lofty precepts therein enunciated for the conduct of man toward man.

Until we take all Christ's principles to our hearts, war, hatred and violence will continue.

Q. What is your remedy for the prevailing crimes of violence, divorce, and drink in the United States?

A. I would cure them all by self-purification and non-violence.”

On December 10, 1931, during the Geneva meeting, which was held during the lunch hour in the Victoria Hall under the auspices of the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom, and attended by about 2,000 people, Gandhi responded to a question about the difference between his message and the Christian<sup>7</sup>:

“I do not profess to give any original message at all. My message is as old as this earth, and I do not know that it is at all different from the Christian message. If you mean by it non-violence, I should be sorry to discover that you have given up the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Nothing will give me greater pleasure than that the Christians of Europe were translating in their lives the message of Jesus. [...]”

An unknown English friend has thought it worthwhile cabling to Gandhi that in launching upon civil disobedience he would be going against the teaching of Jesus: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's"<sup>8</sup>:

“As I hold my conduct to be in utter agreement with universal religion and as I hold the New Testament teaching in great esteem, I should not like it to be justly said of me that I was going against the teaching of Jesus. "Render unto Caesar" was quoted against me before too. I have not read into the celebrated verse the meaning that my critics have sought to put into it. Jesus evaded the direct question put to him because it was a trap. He was in no way bound to

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<sup>6</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Interview to the Press - Delhi, March 21, 1931; *The Hindu*, 22-3-1931; in: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, vol. 45, p. 319

<sup>7</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Speech at Meeting, Geneva, December 10, 1931 - from the manuscript of Mahadev Desai's Diary; in: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, vol. 48, p. 421

<sup>8</sup> M. K. Gandhi: 'Render unto Caesar', *Young India*, 27-3-1930; in: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, vol. 43, pp. 131f.

answer it. He therefore asked to see the coin for taxes. And then said with withering scorn, "How can you who traffic in Caesar's coins and thus receive what to you are benefits of Caesar's rule refuse to pay taxes?" Jesus's whole preaching and practice point unmistakably to non-co-operation, which necessarily includes nonpayment of taxes. Jesus never recognized man's authority as against God's. He who disregarded the whole host of priesthood, which was in those days superior to kinghood, would not have hesitated to defy the might of emperors had he found it necessary. And did he not treat with supreme disdain the whole of the farcical trial through which he was made to pass?"

In his letter to Miss Sonja Schlesin in Johannesburg, South Africa, dated May 22, 1927. Gandhi wrote about the one lesson he learned from reading religious works<sup>9</sup>:

“In reading all religious works, I have learnt one thing. Never to take them literally but understand the drift and catch the drift also by means of what is to me an infallible canon of interpretation, and reject those which cannot stand the test of Truth and Ahimsa. I know that even in spite of this canon of interpretation difficulties do arise; but they are solved if one has patience and if one has a living faith in God.”

In the year 1936, Gandhi summarized the “implications and conditions of success of non-violence” in six points<sup>10</sup>:

- “(1) Non-violence is the law of the human race and is infinitely greater than and superior to brute force.
- (2) In the last resort it does not avail to those who do not possess a living faith in the God of Love.
- (3) Non-violence affords the fullest protection to one's self-respect and sense of honour, but not always to possession of land or movable property, though its habitual practice does prove a better bulwark than the possession of armed men to defend them. Non-violence in the very nature of things is of no assistance in the defence of ill-gotten gains and immoral acts.
- (4) Individuals or nations who would practise non-violence must be prepared to sacrifice (nations to the last man) their all except honour. It is therefore inconsistent with the possession of other people's countries, i.e., modern imperialism which is frankly based on force for its defence.
- (5) Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all - children, young men and women or grown-up people - provided they have a living faith in the God of love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When non-violence is accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not applied to isolated acts.
- (6) It is a profound error to suppose that whilst the law is good enough for individuals it is not for masses of mankind.”

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<sup>9</sup> M. K. Gandhi: Letter to Sonja Schlesin - Ashram, Sabarmati, May 22, 1927; in: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 33, p. 355

<sup>10</sup> M. K. Gandhi: God of Love, Not of War, Harijan, 5-9-1936, in: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), vol. 63, pp. 262