

Gandhian *Ahimsa*: A Christian Understanding

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***Ahimsa* = Supreme Love**

Ahimsa is a Sanskrit word which is generally translated as non-violence. (Do not kill, do not harm, no injury, no offending, etc.) It means non-violence to any form of life. No negative thought or word or deed against anyone. This non-violence is not only to human beings but to any form of life; and even to every creation including the earth and the nature. In its positive aspect, it is the supreme love for all living things and to all creation. It is not a new concept. Gandhi use to say that he has nothing new to teach the world; truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. *Ahimsa* (Love) is the only means to reach God. And from time eternal, it is the only means for the total and integral welfare of all.

a) *Negative way of explaining reality (Nehti-nethi)*. It is a natural way of explaining reality; and it is a typical Indian way of saying (*nehti-nethi* means not this, not that, etc.) Examples: explaining God, most of the laws and regulations are explained in a negative way. Eg. The commandments: do not kill; do not steal; do not commit adultery; etc.; No ID – No entry; do not come late; do not eat without washing your hands etc. But we have to see the positive meaning and the spirit behind the negative expressions. We need to go beyond and beyond and beyond to see the really real. Thus we have the expression “The Beyond”, “The

Ultimate", "The Supreme" referring to God. Here in the word *Ahimsa* also we have to see the positive meaning and the real spirit behind it. When we analyze the Gandhian concept of *Ahimsa*, we have to see it in his religious background; in the religious background of India.

b) *Hindu concept of God and Ahimsa: Rig Veda*,¹ which is the oldest Hindu Sacred Scripture, speaks of one God as supreme over all other gods who is the source of all living beings. Gandhi states: "The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life, not only human beings, but all sentient beings, is one, i.e., all life coming from the One Universal Source, call it God, or *Parameshwara*."² Hinduism believes in the oneness not merely of all human life, but in the oneness of all that lives.³ As a Hindu, Gandhi had cultivated such a belief. The *Vedas* teach us the sacredness of life and the need of practicing *Ahimsa*, which is considered the mother of all virtues. The *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* give primary importance to truth and *Ahimsa* to maintain the welfare of the human society.⁴

In some other sacred writings of Hinduism we can see that *Ahimsa* (non-violence or non-violent love which is the supreme form of love) is the *parama dharma* (the highest morality) and it is the most important means (*sadhana*) for God-realization. There we find: "*Ahimsa parmo dharmo*"; which means, "Non-violent love is the supreme law."⁵ *Ahimsa* is the supreme duty and the way of life of human being: "*Ahimsa* is the highest duty, the highest self-control, the highest gift, the highest penance, the highest sacrifice, the best friend and the highest form of happiness."⁶

¹ *Rig Veda* is the oldest of the four Vedas; the date of its composition is unknown. Approximately 2000 BC they are found more or less as we have it now.

² *Harijan*, December 26, 1936; Also Collected Works, LXIV, 141. *Parameshwara* means the Supreme God.

³ *Raghavan Iyer* (ed.), *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 27.

⁴ R.R. Diwakar, *Gandhiji's Life, Thought and Philosophy*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963, 29.

⁵ *Mahabharata Adhiparva*, XI, 13.

⁶ *Mahabharata, Anusasana-Parva*, 116, 38-39.

Again we read: "Neither with the eye nor with the mind nor with voice should one injure another. One should not disparage another; nor speak ill of others. One should not hurt any living being."⁷

c) *Ahimsa in Buddhism*: Buddhism criticized killing of animals even for the sake of sacrifice, to safeguard the real spirit of *Ahimsa*. Buddha teaches that the miseries and sufferings in the world can be overcome only by *Ahimsa*, the positive principle of ethics. Positively it advocates universal love for all beings. The doctrine of Buddhism essentially is not merely brotherhood of man but brotherhood of all life.⁸ Buddhist teachings on sacrifice, renunciation, toleration, purity of heart, and respect and care for all living beings including animals are all expressions of *Ahimsa* and it really touched the heart of Gandhi and he tried to live according to it for the welfare of all.⁹ Buddhism teaches *Ahimsa* as the real and the only righteous way to *Nirvana* (Heaven): "Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good; let him overcome the greed by liberality; the liar by truth! Speak the truth, do not yield to anger; and this is the only way to *Nirvana* (Heaven)."¹⁰

d) *Ahimsa in Jainism*: The Jainism is the first to make *Ahimsa*, non-violence, into a rule of life.¹¹ *Ahimsa* is the essence of Jain religion and spirituality. The monks and the followers of Jainism had to obey the great vow of non-violence as the supreme law of life in the strictest sense:

I renounce killing all living beings, whether subtle or gross, whether movable or immovable. Nor shall I myself kill living beings, nor cause others do it, nor consent to do it.¹²

⁷ *Mahabharata*, *Santi-Parva*, 278, 4-6.

⁸ *Collected Works*, LVI, 56.

⁹ *Collected Works*, XXXV, 244-247.

¹⁰ *Dharmapada*, tr. Max Müller, *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. X, Part I, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, verses 223-225.

¹¹ S. Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957, 251.

¹² *Acaranga Sutra* II. 15.11. Quoted in J. Peringamala, *Jain View of Ahimsa from a Christian Dialogical Perspective*, Ph.D. Diss., Rome: Pontifical Urban University, 1990, 131.

The followers of Jainism, especially the monks, take extreme care not to hurt any living being in thought, word, or action, due to their belief in the sanctity of life. Right living in Jainism consists in five virtues namely, non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy and detachment from worldly things.¹³ Gandhi adopted all these virtues as a way of life for him and for his followers for the welfare of all.

e) *Ahimsa in Christianity*: The teachings of Jesus are very clear:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. (Mt 5:21-22).

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ... Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Mt 5: 38-42)

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; ... (Mt 5: 43-48; Lk 6: 27-36)

The song of St. Paul on love is really a song on Ahimsa:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Cor 13: 4-7)

Again St. Paul says:

If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12: 20-21)

¹³ Patanjali's *Yogasutra*, 1: 30.

The teachings of Jesus, summarized in the Sermon on the Mount are clearly reflected in the life and teachings of Gandhi. Some people may ask: who can live perfectly according to the teachings of Christ? And here its practicability is proved by Gandhi and he became *Mahatma* (Great Soul). Gandhi says: "Christ's Sermon on the Mount fills me with bliss even today. Its sweetness has even today the power to quench my agony of soul."¹⁴ Gandhi accepts his indebtedness to Christ's teachings: "Jesus played a great part in my life ... When I began to read the Sermon on the Mount, I felt the beauty of it ... and in my talks I can't avoid reference to the Bible."¹⁵ The image of the crucified Christ he saw in the Sistine Chapel, Rome, inspired him to imitate the virtues of voluntary suffering and love of enemies: "I saw there at once that nations, like individuals, could only be made through the agony of the Cross and in no other way. Joy comes not out of affliction of pain on others, but out of pain voluntarily borne by oneself."¹⁶ He practiced the difficult evangelical precept of turning the other cheek to the person who strikes. Gandhi accepts:

The verse 'But I say unto you, that you resist not evil: who-soever shall smite thee on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man takes away your coat let him have your cloak too' delighted me beyond measure."¹⁷

Gandhi got much inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus Christ asked his disciples to conquer violence with infinite patience and forgiveness (Cf. Mt 5: 44). Though he was a Hindu by birth, he was a real Christian in spirit by leading a life according to the teachings of Christ. Gandhi testified his indebtedness to Christ through his belief in the practice of *Ahimsa*:

Though I cannot claim to be a Christian in the sectarian sense, the example of Jesus' suffering is a factor in the

¹⁴ *Collected Works*, XIII: 220.

¹⁵ C. Shukia, *Gandhi's View of Life*, ed. K.M. Munshi and R.R. Diwakar, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, 1951, 155-156.

¹⁶ M.K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ*, ed. Anand T. Hingorani, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963, 68.

¹⁷ *Autobiography*, 58.

composition of my undying faith in nonviolence 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 life by the Law of Love.”¹⁸

Gandhi borrowed the concept of God as love from Christianity. “Let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God, and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (1 Jn 4:7-8). Gandhi affirms: “I do not envisage God other than truth and non-violence.”¹⁹ Gandhi literally accepted and practiced Jesus Christ’s teaching on love of neighbor (Lk 10:30-37), love of enemies (Mt 5:43-45), non-retaliation (Mt 5:38-42), and overcoming evil with good (Rom 12: 20-21), as the main principles of his liberating leadership.

Gandhi’s Concept of *Ahimsa*

a) *Ahimsa is the supreme form of love*: The influence of the Asian religions, especially Buddhism, helped Gandhi to be a man of *Ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* is the supreme form of love. “It is love that sustains the earth. There only is life where there is love.”²⁰ Literally *Ahimsa* means non-injury, non-cruelty, non-violence, non-killing and non-coercion. Gandhi clarifies: “Non-violence, translated ‘love’, is the supreme law for human beings.”²¹ *Ahimsa* is a very comprehensive term. Positively, it means the universal supreme love, compassion, patient hearing, positive benevolence, forgiveness, interest and selfless concern in the welfare of other beings. Gandhian *Ahimsa* is completely free from ill-will, duplicity, jealousy, anger, hatred, enmity and violence; it moves us into a wider world of universal love.

¹⁸ *Collected Works*, LXVIII: 278.

¹⁹ *Harijan*, April 7, 1946.

²⁰ M.K. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as Told in His Own Words*, ed. Krishna Kriplani, Ahmadabad: Navajeevan Publishing House, 1960, 95.

²¹ Raghavan Iyer. *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 484.

b) *Ahimsa includes the whole creation*: *Ahimsa* is the positive principle of supreme love, kindness and sympathy not only towards human beings but also towards all creation. Gandhi describes it as the highest love to all beings: “*Ahimsa* means ‘love’ in the Pauline sense, and yet something more than ‘love’ defined by St. Paul, although I know St. Paul’s beautiful definition is good enough for all practical purposes” (1Cor 13: 1-13). *Ahimsa* includes the whole creation, and not only human. It does not express a negative force, but a force superior to all the forces put together.²²

c) *Ahimsa is doing good even to the evil doer*: Positively *Ahimsa* is overflowing respect, love, and care aiming at the total welfare of all beings. *Ahimsa* is the greatest love for all beings shown in one’s thinking, word and action. It is the divine energy to serve everybody selflessly. For Gandhi, there is not much difference between *Ahimsa* and compassion because the latter is the expression of the former.²³ The concrete form of *Ahimsa* is compassion. Positively, *Ahimsa* means loving every living being in a spirit of non-attachment so that the integral good of all is attained. It is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil doer.²⁴ It means service to all living beings in need.²⁵

d) *Ahimsa and Agape: One and the same*: *Ahimsa* is the best means to God (Truth) – realization. Gandhi writes: “Without *Ahimsa* it is not possible to seek and find Truth. ... *Ahimsa* is the means and Truth is the end.”²⁶ Again: “Non-violence appears to be the only straight path to realization of God in the form of Truth.”²⁷ Through the prophet Hosea God speaks: “For it is love

²² *Collected Works*, LXII: 200.

²³ *Collected Works*, XIII: 295.

²⁴ M.K. Gandhi, *From Yervada Mandir: Ashram Observances*, tr. Valji G. Desai, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1932; reprint, 1980, 7.

²⁵ A. Thottakara, *Gandhian Experiments with Ahimsa*, in *Gandhian Spirituality*, ed. A. Thottakara, Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies, 1992, 70.

²⁶ M.K. Gandhi, *From Yervada Mandir: Ashram Observances*, tr. Valji G. Desai, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1932; reprint, 1980, 8; Also: *Collected Works*, XLIV: 59.

²⁷ *Collected Works*, LVI: 156.

that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts." (Hos 6: 6). Jesus teaches: "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt 9: 13). Again "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (Jn 13: 34). Gandhi says: "*Ahimsa* binds us to one another and to God. *Ahimsa* and love (selfless love or *Agape*) is one and the same thing."²⁸

e) *Ahimsa Manifests in Service*: Gandhi's entire life can be summarized as an evolution or growth in *Ahimsa*. He writes: "I have been a worshipper and servant of non-violence for fifty years."²⁹ It was the *Ahimsa* force or soul energy that made Gandhi strong enough to fight for justice, equality, peace, harmony and human dignity. Gandhi practiced *Ahimsa* in all spheres of his life: political, economic and social. He tried to worship God through a life of non-violence by doing service to others including cleaning latrines, living and working among the untouchables, helping the poor and nursing the sick. He states: "Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed."³⁰

f) *Gandhi: The Apostle of Ahimsa*: For Gandhi, *Ahimsa* is not a mere philosophical principle. It is the rule and breath of his life.³¹ In one way, his experiments with truth were nothing but application of the moral principle of *Ahimsa* to every day life in his relationship with other human beings and all living beings. H. M. Jha writes: "Gandhi in our own times comes as the great apostle of *Ahimsa*. He had drunk from the fountains of ancient wisdom and tried to revive the principle of *Ahimsa* as a dynamic soul-force in modern India. His innovation lies in extending the application of *Ahimsa* in political life on a mass scale."³² He followed the path of *Ahimsa* with courage and good will for the maximum good of all, i.e., *sarvodaya*. Gandhi was an embodiment

²⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *Truth is God*, ed. R. K. Prabhu, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955; reprint, 1980, (here after it will be referred as M.K. Gandhi, *Truth is God*.) 17.

²⁹ *Collected Works*, LXVI: 416.

³⁰ *Young India*, March 23, 1922.

³¹ Cf. *Collected Works*, XXXVII: 271.

³² H.M. Jha, The Concept of *Ahimsa* in Indian Ethics, in *Indian Philosophical Annual*, 1960, 108.

of *Ahimsa* and self-suffering. In living a life of *Ahimsa* he spent 2,089 days in prison in India and 249 days in prison in South Africa. He had to face physical and mental suffering in the form of humiliation, insults, calumny, violence, imprisonment, punishment and finally he gave up his own life. Gandhi firmly believed that *Ahimsa* is the only remedy to world problems and it is the only solution to save humankind and to establish world peace.

Ahimsa: A Liberating Force

a) *Ahimsa for Equality and Universal brotherhood:* Gandhi had fought and led millions of Indians with a vision of individual freedom. He wanted the people to develop the spirit of love and brotherhood. He wanted them to help themselves and respect each other as brother and sister. "I have never in my life regarded anyone as my servant, but as a brother or a sister", he said.³³ Gandhi wanted women to be equal to men, live with dignity. Again he wanted untouchability to be absolutely eliminated, and all Hindus to be equal and united. For him, all these are expressions of *Ahimsa*, the supreme love.

b) *Ahimsa is self-sacrificing:* For Gandhi there were many causes that he was prepared to die for but no causes that he was prepared to kill for. According to him: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."³⁴ *Ahimsa* is the eradication of the desire to injure or to kill.³⁵ Again, *Ahimsa* is the strongest force known, which no power on earth can wipe out.³⁶ True *ahimsa* should mean a complete freedom from ill-will and anger and hate and an overflowing love for all.³⁷ *Ahimsa* calls for the strength and courage to suffer without retaliation, to receive blows without returning

³³ D.G. Tendulkar (ed.), *Mahatma*, vol. 2, 279.

³⁴ Cf. E.S. Reddy, *The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi*, A speech on Mahatma Gandhi, sponsored by Consulate General of India, New York, and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, USA, New India House, January 30, 2003.

³⁵ *The Collected Works*, XIV 463.

³⁶ *The Mind of Mahatmai*, 3rd ed., Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968, 147. Also D.G. Tendulkar (ed.), *Mahatma*, vol. 5, 307.

³⁷ D.G. Tendulkar (ed.), *Mahatma*, vol. 2, 318.

any.³⁸ True *ahimsa* should wear a smile even on deathbed brought about by an assailant. It is only with that *ahimsa* that we can befriend our opponents and win their love.³⁹

c) *Ahimsa: The Christian Way*: Again he says: "No power on earth can subjugate you, when you are armed with the sword of *ahimsa*. It ennobles both the victor and the vanquished."⁴⁰ Gandhi admits that Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. His was non-violence par excellence. Really Jesus remains the greatest teacher and example of non-violence (Lk 23:34). But it took godly men like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. to reawaken Christians to the importance of non-violence as the norm of the Christian response to persecution, oppression, abuse and injustice.

***Ahimsa* in Gandhi's dealings with the opponents**

a) *Never any harsh words*: There were never harsh words from Gandhi for anybody, even when he was on the receiving end of some terrible criticism. For example, Subash Chandra Bose had repeatedly declared from Europe that Gandhi's leadership had failed. Jinnah called him a hypocrite, and openly accused him of suppressing Muslims. And Savarkar attacked him as being a "traitor" by conceding Pakistan and guarding and supporting the Muslims at the expense of Hindus. But Gandhi reacted against them.

b) *Brotherly dealings*: Even at the height of the tensions between the Congress and the Muslim separatists, Gandhi never refrained from openly talking to Jinnah, calling him "my brother."

c) *Supporting the opponents*: When the World War ended and the INA surrendered to the British, Gandhi openly praised their bravery and encouraged the Congress to itself take up the work of rehabilitating INA soldiers, supporting the families of the soldiers and honoring their sacrifices.

³⁸ D.G. Tendulkar (ed.), *Mahatma*, vol. 7, 75.

³⁹ D.G. Tendulkar (ed.), *Mahatma*, vol. 5, 243.

⁴⁰ D.G. Tendulkar (ed.), *Mahatma*, vol. 7, 11.

d) *Gracious and civil to the enemies:* To his direct and main opponents, the British, Gandhi was always most gracious and civil. While he was the victim of Raj propaganda attempting to defame him and break up the freedom fighters, Gandhi's image in the United Kingdom proper was of a holy man, a lovable, saint-like gentle soul.

e) *Nursing and caring:* During the Boer War (1899), he formed an Indian corps of stretcher-bearers. (Boers had been incorporated into the British Empire, but Indians were kept out.) He also rendered one to two hours of nursing service everyday in a nearby charitable hospital, opened on his initiative.⁴¹ During the Zulu rebellion (1906), Gandhi once again supported England, forming a group of 24 Indian stretcher-bearers. They nursed the Zulus and took care of wounded English soldiers.

f) *Helping in time of needs:* In 1914, when white railway workers went on strike, Gandhi cancelled the announced second mass march against the Government. This so touched the British that they granted the Indians their rights.⁴² During the World War I, Gandhi encouraged Indians to give unconditional service to the Empire. He formed an Indian Volunteer Corps to do the nursing care.

g) *Gandhi: A typical example:* When Gandhi was in South Africa, he was traveling by train and the conductor came and rudely told Gandhi to leave the compartment. "But Sir, I have a ticket," Gandhi replied. The conductor violently threw him out from the train and said, "You do not deserve to ride on this train!" Gandhi however did not raise an arm in his defense. He took all the pain and insult to himself. And today, does anyone know the name of that conductor who threw him from the train? But today the name of that railway station is 'Mahatma Gandhi Station'! His *Ahimsa* (sacrifice) made him eternal.

⁴¹ *Autobiography*, 177.

⁴² Vincent Chittilappilly, *Gandhian Asceticism: Its Value in Renewed Asian Spirituality*, Manila, UST Publishing House, 2001, 45.

***Ahimsa* in Leadership (Lead = Love = Liberate)**

a) *To lead means to love:* From the image of Jesus, the Servant-leader (the Good Shepherd), we see the functions of a leader. Leading means: feeding, protecting, healing, comforting, refreshing, reconciling, forgiving, caring, bringing back the strayed, searching for the lost, embracing, teaching, enlightening, pushing & encouraging, defending & instilling the faith, helping, guarding & watching over, advising, correcting, directing, mentoring, defending etc. etc. And if it is needed, dying for the sheep is one of the main responsibilities of a good shepherd-leader. Every thing can be summarized in one word "loving". So to lead means to love.

b) *To love means to liberate:* Love (*Ahimsa*) includes everything. It gives life; it promotes life. This is the meaning of being a good shepherd; this is the meaning of being a true servant; this is the meaning of being a leader-liberator. Practically it seems impossible! If you find it impossible, look at the life of Jesus and Gandhi. Is it still impossible? Then look at our mothers. Even though they are sinful and imperfect, they do it for us. They do it their maximum. They make the impossible possible for us, because, they love us. So it is possible with love in the model of Jesus. Gandhi, though a non-Christian, made it possible with the spirit of *Ahimsa* (Supreme Love), the same spirit of Jesus. So let us be mothers! Let us be like Gandhi. Then we will be true shepherds, liberating-leaders.

c) *Gandhian Ahimsa in action:* Gandhi's entire life, his simple life, renunciation, service, *Nishkama karma*, suffering, sacrifice, fasting, prayer meetings, *satyagraha*, fight for justice, fight against untouchability, fight for the liberation of women, struggle for unity & communal harmony, work for the upliftment of *Harijans*, work for the universal brotherhood, struggle for political freedom, work for the social & religious reformation, ashram life, charitable organizations etc. were all the expressions of his *Ahimsa*. And he did every thing for the wellbeing of all, the total and integral liberation of all. □