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## Tolerance and Nonviolent Practices

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In the following essay, I will refer to Celtic spiritual traditions: Tolstoy's "The Kingdom of God is Within You," and Gandhi's biographies including the "Eighteen Last Years," each with their focus on nonviolence and tolerance.

The etymological meaning of "tolerance" is "to endure or support" and derived from it is the word "extol" meaning "to exalt" or "raise high," whereas violence is derived from "Violare" which means "to force." A Sanskrit word for Violence is "himsa" and its contrary is Ahimsa (Nonviolence), an ethical term suggesting an underlying attitude based on good intentions, good thought, and active engagement with issues. Nonviolence tends to be pro-active, whereas passive resistance tends to be reactive.

In terms of Celtic spiritual traditions, the period from the 6th to the 11th century placed an emphasis on spiritual practices involving nonviolence and tolerance. Chanting the following Beatitudes from the "Sermon on the Mount" was a daily practice in many Celtic monasteries: "Blessed are the poor [humble] in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God; Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; Blessed are the merciful. . . ; Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God; Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God; The Golden Rule was often invoked, that one should "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jesus' teaching requires both agape and righteousness. In both, attitude and action, inward and outward become one. . . listeners are summoned to an unlimited responsibility that they cannot escape." (1)

One of the outstanding clergies of the Celtic spiritual period was St. Eunan (aka Adomnan, 624–704) the Abbot of Iona, Scotland, who wrote a biography of his 6th century ancestor, St. Columba, the founder of Iona Monastery. Eunan began a campaign in the 7th century known as "The

Law of the Innocents” (Cain Eunan) or “Peace of Eunan.” It was said that his supporters met with 100 chieftains throughout Ireland, Scotland, and Wales and convinced them not to involve women, children, the elderly, or clergy in warfare. This agreement, which held true for centuries, was a considerable accomplishment at a time when violent wars between clans was widespread. (2)

The 20th century Celtic scholar, Myles Dillon, noted similarities between the Celtic and Indian traditions based on the fact that they were located in the extreme ends of the Indo-European world and were conservative cultures that retained certain features in common. Dillon noted in his book Celts and Aryans that “the Indo-Europeans believed in Truth as the supreme power by which all creation is governed. . .” [It was] “a life-giving principle and sustaining power in the world which appeared in Greek thought in 500 BC as the “logos” (Truth) of Heraclitus, and later in the Gospel of John as “logos Kyriou.” (3)

In 1880, Noncooperation was introduced in County Mayo in order to redress wrongs perpetrated by the landlord agent, Captain Boycott, who was demanding higher rents than poor tenants could afford to pay. This Noncooperation was successfully prosecuted with the help of the Land League, a newly formed national organization intended to help beleaguered tenants. This “boycotting” process was adopted by Gandhi as Noncooperation and became an essential part of the nonviolent movement for Indian Independence.

In 1920, fasting was invoked by Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who was imprisoned by the British during the Irish Independence movement. He undertook a hunger strike that lasted 74 days, resulting in his death on 25 October 1920 at the age of 41. His fast unto death gained worldwide attention with Nehru stating that he was inspired by his example, and Gandhi considering him a major influence on his life. (4)

More recently, in 1981, 10 hunger strikers fasted to death in the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland in order to draw attention to the need for better conditions in prison and also to protest the lack of civil rights for Catholic Nationalists. One of them, Bobby Sands, was elected an MP to the British Parliament shortly before dying of starvation. His death, with the other nine, galvanized anti-British feeling among the Irish diaspora. This led to more serious attempts at reconciliation and, finally, to the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. Soon afterward, British troops were removed from Northern Ireland and an open border with the Republic of Ireland became a normal part of cross-border activities. (5)

Halfway around the world, Britain's other colony, India, was also endeavoring to gain Independence and Mohandas Gandhi took up fasting as a strategic and spiritual practice. Following World War I, he also adopted nonviolent noncooperation against the British Raj even though not all of his fasts were political. His first fast in India was in support of workers who were refused a livable wage by mill owners in Ahmedabad. Gandhi's fast was decisive in a settlement agreement. The principles that he adopted were Satyagraha (Truth Force) and Nonviolence (Ahimsa), two principles rooted in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu tradition.

Gandhi was initially inspired by Count Leo Tolstoy, whose book The Kingdom of God is Within You, had a powerful impact when he first encountered it in South Africa, where he had lived for 22 years. He founded Tolstoy Farm which was supported by a merchant benefactor and then brought his wife and family from India to join him. This spiritual community was inspired by the principles of Nonviolence and Truth that Count Leo Tolstoy promoted. (6)

Tolstoy's own spiritual journey toward Nonviolence and Truth seeking began after his participation as a soldier in the brutal war at Sevastopol. Following the Crimean War, he resigned from the military and had extended stays in Paris on two separate occasions (1858 and 1860) where he encountered Victor Hugo and other notable authors. One of them encouraged him to read a recently translated German version of The Tirukkural (Sacred Verses), a classic Tamil text dealing with: "Aram" (virtue), Porul (polity), and Inbam (love). In Aram, the text focused on moral vegetarianism and nonkilling (Ahimsa), basing itself on secular ethics that "expounded a universal, moral and practical attitude towards life... [and] spoke of the ways of cultivating one's mind to achieve other-worldly bliss in the present life..." Nonharming was considered the "foremost of virtues, even above [that of] Truth". A quote from the Tirukkural itself indicates the emphasis placed on Nonviolence: "Not killing What is the work of virtue? 'Not to kill'; For 'killing' leads to every work of ill. Never to destroy life is the sum of all virtuous conduct. The destruction of life leads to every evil. Let those that [are in] need partake [of] your meal; guard everything that lives; his the chief and sum of lore that hoarded wisdom gives. The chief of all (the virtues) which authors have summed up, is the partaking of food that has been shared with others, and the preservation of the manifold life of other creatures." (6)

Tolstoy was inspired by his readings of the Tirukkural and his discussion with other French thinkers, including Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, an anarchist writer who wrote "La Guerre et La paix" (War and Peace), a title Tolstoy

borrowed for his own book. According to Tolstoy, Proudhon “was the only man who understood the significance of education and the printing press in our time.” Returning to his estate in Yasnaya Polyana, he founded 13 schools for the children of Russian peasants, based on democratic principles. This was helped by the fact that emancipation from serfdom had taken place in 1861. (7)

After devoting himself to writing his renowned books Tolstoy went through a profound spiritual crisis and then wrote “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” and “What is to be Done” in 1886. He became known as a radical pacifist and devoted himself to exploring the implications of Nonviolence. His “Letters to a Hindu” in South Africa helped set Gandhi on a path that was as radical as Tolstoy’s but with the need to assimilate European and Indian religious ideals and religious practices. Tolstoy’s views on Truth and Nonviolence became core principles which encouraged Gandhi to explore Indian philosophy and religion in order to re-discover similar principles from his own tradition.

Tolstoy’s reading of the “Sermon on the Mount” and the Golden Rule “that they should do unto others as I would that they should do unto me” became a deeply held belief, and even an obsession. He asserted, “only when I yield to the intuition of Love...is my own heart happy and at rest... The Divine work... which [can be] accomplished in this world and which I participate in by living, is comprehensible to me... [and] this is the annihilation of discord and strife among all men and among all creatures and the establishment of the highest unity, concord and love.” As he noted in a letter at the time, “The way to do away with war is for those who do not want war, who regard participation in it as a sin, to refrain from fighting.” (8)

After founding Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi agreed in principle with Tolstoy’s intent to bring to fruition the “kingdom of God on earth” but formulated his own version as the “The kingdom of Rama on earth” which was to be accomplished by Nonviolence as the means and Truth as the end. He noted that, “The first step in Nonviolence is that we cultivate in our daily life... Truthfulness, humility, tolerance and loving kindness... [while] against violence [we must be] ever-wakeful, ever vigilant, ever-striving...” (9)

After returning to India Gandhi articulated this as, “Divinity is omnipresent and sits in the hearts of all...[although] we cannot grasp the essence, even an infinitesimal fraction, [but] when it becomes active within us, it can work wonders.” He continued, “Ahimsa (Nonviolence) is [found] in Hinduism, it is in Christianity, it is in Islam... I have heard it from many Muslim friends that the Koran teaches the use of Nonviolence. It regards forbearance as superior to vengeance. The very word Islam means peace,

which is nonviolence. Badshakhan, [Abdul Ghaffer Khan] a staunch Muslim never misses his Namaz and Ramzan.” This allusion was to Badshakhan’s involvement with Gandhi at his early morning meditations at his Ashram. Badshakhan would later lead Pathans in the border provinces in nonviolent protests based on Gandhian principles. His nonviolent actions led to incarceration in British and Pakistani prisons for over 30 years.

In Gandhi’s Ashram, in addition to invoking Rama, Muslim prayers, as noted above, were offered and Christian hymns were sung. Gandhi stated that when he referred to Hinduism, he was including Jainism and Buddhism. His eclecticism was understandable given his background in London attending Christian services, while later in South Africa, he developed deep friendships with Indian Muslim merchants. The merging of prayers and invocations of all three religions in early morning devotions would lead him to insist on the sayings: “Truth is God; Love is God,” as a way of transcending theological differences. (10)

After World War I Gandhi became more deeply infused with Indian aspirations for Independence from Britain and also became more immersed in the Bhagavad Gita (the Song of God), which encapsulated his strong faith that the Gita represented the eternal duel between forces of evil and good and that good would ultimately prevail. (11)

Although Gandhi’s fasts were often strategically motivated, his strict vegetarianism and belief in extensive fasting were inspired by his mother whose devotional life had included frequent fasts associated with Jain asceticism. Prior to leaving for London to study law, Gandhi made a vow to his mother to maintain a strict vegetarian diet. The importance of vows and pledges became profoundly important methods he adopted in his organizing campaigns for redressing social wrongs in South Africa, and working to improve conditions for mill workers and poor farmers in India.

In an interview with Maurice Frydman in August 1935, he stated that “the only way to find God is to see Him in his creation and be one with [creation]. He continued, “I am part and parcel of the whole and cannot find [Divinity] apart from the rest of humanity.” “Untouchability, khadi and village regeneration [is] where my energy is concentrated. Hindu-Muslim unity is my fourth love. . . I have never ceased to yearn after communal peace.”(12)

In a later discussion with Frydman, he observed that “nonviolence implies complete self-purification” and “is without exception, superior to violence. The power at the disposal of the nonviolent person is always greater than if he was violent.” (13)

Gandhi developed a plan for a “Peace Brigade” that would build tolerance. He insisted that: “a messenger of peace must have equal regard for all the principal religions of the world, which means they should possess a knowledge of different faiths.” While intending to organize peace brigades, violence was beginning to take place on a massive scale when Europe was once again preparing for war.

On 6 October 1938, Gandhi stated that “the Peace of Munich” is the triumph of violence [but] it is also its defeat...[and asked rhetorically whether] “Germany or Italy added anything to the moral wealth of mankind?” (14)

When World War II was underway, India was asked to join the war effort in support of Britain. Gandhi wrote from his Ashram in Sevagram to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, that it was the position of the Indian Congress that there was “. . . a conscientious objection to helping a war to which they were never invited and which they regarded. . . as one for saving imperialism, of which India is the greatest victim.” Gandhi discussed the need for civil disobedience and in October 1940 wrote: “We want to tell the people of India that, if they will win Swaraj [Independence] through non-violent means they may not co-operate militarily with Britain in the prosecution of the war.” (15)

On 14 July 1942, the Indian Congress approved a resolution declaring “the immediate ending of the British rule in India” which became known as the “Quit India” resolution. Gandhi was arrested by the British and incarcerated from August 1942 to May 1944. During that incarceration, Gandhi’s wife, Kasturba, who was also in prison, died in February 1944. In response to a question about the trials he was facing, he maintained that his faith was strong: “I do not try to analyze God, I go behind the relative to the Absolute and I get my peace of mind. . . man becomes man by becoming a tabernacle of the Divine.” (16)

For Gandhi, Indian Independence meant adopting *Ramarajya*, (i.e., “the Kingdom of God on Earth”) by economic means as well as political and moral. For him, economic development meant “entire freedom from British capitalist and capital, as also their Indian counterpart. This means capitalists share their skill and capital with the lowliest and least.” By moral he meant “from [the use of] armed defense forces. . . mankind must recoil from the horrors of war.” (17)

On 15 August 1947, India became independent. Gandhi failed to establish Hindu and Muslim unity and did not succeed in integrating the Harijan (Untouchables) into the Hindu community in the way he wished. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956) preferred the name Dalits (the oppressed) and

encouraged a mass conversion to Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar, who was born a Dalit, formally adopted Buddhism toward the end of his life. He had been educated in the USA and England and became India's first Law and Justice Minister and the architect of the Constitution of India. He was critical of Gandhi's efforts to improve the condition of the Untouchable caste since Dr. Ambedkar believed that only the "annihilation of castes" would resolve the inequalities in Indian society that had subjected the Dalits to poverty and misery.

With the unleashing of the destructive forces of partition and the death of one million Hindus and Moslems, Gandhi asked: "What sin must I have committed that He should keep me alive to witness all these horrors." Facing his last fast, he wrote: "It is my belief that death is a friend to whom we should be grateful." He added: "so I am not yet a Mahatma." On 30 January 1948, Mohandas Gandhi was assassinated by a Brahmin, a nationalist Hindu who was convinced that India needed to be militarily strong and that Gandhi did not represent the kind of strength that was needed to create a strong and virile Indian nation.

Despite his own self-recrimination, Gandhi became popularly known as the Father of the Nation, and his life and writings inspired civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, as well as Nelson Mandela in South Africa, who were intent on creating more just societies. Spiritual writers, such as Thomas Merton were also inspired, as were countless others who continue to take up the mantle of Nonviolence in rallies and demonstrations.

#### Conclusion:

Although Ireland and India were thousands of miles apart, both countries were driven by a compelling need to gain independence from Britain. Leaders, such as Gandhi in India and Terence MacSwiney in the Republic of Ireland, were willing to fast unto death. MacSwiney died in prison. In Northern Ireland, Bobby Sands, with nine others, was willing to fast to death in order to gain a united Ireland, although their intentions, prior to prison, had included violence. But Gandhi was deeply convinced that means and ends had to be consistent and resorted to fasting as an ascetic discipline for the purpose of gaining Indian independence. But for the 10 young men in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland, fasting resulted in their death. Yet, their sacrifice became a spur for other leaders, including John Hume (1937–2020) who insisted on nonviolent practices and policies in his organizing efforts. This insistence contributed to the attainment of the Good Friday Agreement

of 1998, and, for his efforts, John Hume co-shared the Nobel Peace Prize and received the Gandhi Peace Prize and the Martin Luther King Award.

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