

Satyagraha and Reconciliation

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Abstract

This paper compares elements from the Christian notion of reconciliation and Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha*. Both Gandhi's work toward liberation and self-rule, *moksha* and *swaraj* respectively, and reconciliation, or forgiveness and renewed relationship, work against oppression and injustice and toward bringing about the conflict transformation and the desired state of relationships. Both assume a moral agency of the victim and impose a moral duty on the victim. There are also differences, notably as to the possible use of violence: nonviolent action is the basis of *satyagraha*, but there is no absolute prohibition of physical force or coercion in reconciliation.

Introduction

In an era when the influence of religion and politics on each other is the constant subject of news and scholarship, there needs to be a renewed interest in how this influence can build a more just and less violent world. There are two ethics, reconciliation in Christianity, and Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha*, which promise just that. There are similarities between *satyagraha*, Gandhi's work toward liberation and self-rule, *moksha* and *swaraj* respectively, and concepts of reconciliation. Both work against oppression and injustice, and toward bringing about the conflict transformation and the desired state of relationships. Both assume the moral agency of the victim, and impose a moral duty on the victim. There is a difference as to the possible use of violence: nonviolent action is the basis of *satyagraha*, while the absolute prohibition of physical force is not always perceived as an essential element of reconciliation.

This paper discusses some of the similarities and dissimilarities between *satyagraha* and reconciliation, with regard to the moral agency and responsibility of the victim in 1) the aims of reconciliation and *satyagraha*, and 2) the method of action.

Definitions and Background

I. *Satyagraha*:

The term *satyagraha* is literally "holding on to Truth" or "truth-force." *Satya* is the term for truth, or absolute being. *Agraha* is the term for holding fast, adherence, or insistence. Therefore the compound word denotes clinging to truth, holding fast to truth, or insistence on truth. "*Satyagraha* is not predominantly civil disobedience, but a quiet and irresistible pursuit of truth" (Gandhi 1945, 498-499).

Although truth is absolute, humans only have a relative knowledge of it. Because we are not capable of knowing the absolute truth, we cannot use violence against those who disagree or differ with us. The discovery of truth is only through non-violence (Gandhi

1951,3; Bondurant 1969, 31-32). Therefore, the second principle of *satyagraha* is *ahimsa* or non-violence. *Ahimsa* is action based on the refusal to do harm (Bondurant 1969, 23). It is the method of testing truth, and is thus the supreme ethical value, and the means to knowing God (Ibid. 25,20).

The third principle of *satyagraha* is suffering, or *tapasya*. *Tapas* is the notion of religious austerity in Hindu scriptures, or of bodily mortification or penance and is identified with renunciation (Ibid. 114). Gandhi brought it into the social and political sphere (Ibid. 114). “Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant” (Gandhi 1920).

Satyagraha, or nonviolent action, is action in accordance with principles of non-violence. There are three stages of action in *satyagraha*: 1) persuasion through reason, 2) persuasion through suffering, 3) nonviolent coercion (Bondurant 1969, 11).

II. Reconciliation

Although religion can inspire violence, it also can inspire peace-making and peace-building.¹ The notion of reconciliation, the rebuilding of just and peaceful relationships after a breach, has deep roots in Christian theology. The Christian scriptures enjoin believers to be reconcilers because of God’s own love and reconciliation with humankind.² Thus, Robert J. Schreiter calls reconciliation central to the Christian message (Schreiter 1999; see also Lederach 1999). This has political and social, as well as personal religious implications: for example, Desmond Tutu argues in *No Future Without Forgiveness* that the inspiration for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was based both in Christianity and the African notion of *ubuntu*, common humanity (1999).

The process of reconciliation after an offense consists of forgiveness by the victim, repentance by the offender, and a renewal of relationship between the parties on a just basis. The process of reconciliation is not necessarily a linear, ordered one, but all elements must occur in some form, sometimes hand in hand, and sometimes over a period of time, and the different elements must occur at the different levels of social, political and interpersonal relationships.

The process of *political reconciliation* consists of conflict transformation, or conflict management informed by political forgiveness, and democratic constitutionalism that incorporates justice in its various expressions. Donald Shriver posits that forgiveness in the corporate context, is thus: 1) to rehearse and give a moral judgment of the wrong, injustice and injury, recognizing that wrongs could be bi- or multi-lateral; 2) to abandon the idea of vengeance; 3) to have empathy for the enemy and recognize its humanity; 4) to aim at the renewal of human relationship. Political forgiveness is both a process and an act that joins a declaration of moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and a commitment to repair fractured human relationships. It is a collective turning from the past that does not ignore or excuse past evil or overlook justice (Shriver 1995, 7-9).

Forgiveness is possibly the most controversial element of reconciliation. Forgiveness, or the release of moral debt, stands in tension with the need and desire for

justice, and thus is conceived by some as in tension with liberation. To overcome this tension, some expand the notion of forgiveness to incorporate justice. For example, Jon Sobrino argues that forgiveness entails forgiveness both of the sin, or sinful reality, and of the sinner. Forgiveness of the sinner is an act of love that converts the sinner, doing good where there is evil and transforming evil into good. To forgive sinful reality is to eradicate it by bearing its weight in love and solidarity with the poor (Sobrino 1994, 58-64).³ On the other hand, Miroslav Volf expresses reluctance to use the terminology of liberation theology in discussions of reconciliation, arguing that the dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor is not helpful for reconciliation, as in many instances the liberated become the oppressed (Volf 2000, 104.) Rather, we should liberate not for freedom as the ultimate goal, but for the sake of reconciliation, for what he calls the “kingdom of embrace” (Ibid. 104-5)⁴

I suggest that reconciliation incorporates *both* the need for forgiveness and for justice. Forgiveness by a victim is essential for the liberation of the inner self and for the rebuilding of relationship, but not sufficient by itself. The corresponding moral action by the offender, repentance, is essential for establishing justice and the liberation of society. Only with all these elements can there be true reconciliation.

III. The Moral Agency of the Victim in Satyagraha and Reconciliation

Both reconciliation and *satyagraha* hold both the victim and the offender responsible to work toward justice, liberation, and reconciliation. There is an argument that the victim has been the one to suffer, and to add moral responsibility to the victim to do something about it is to add insult to injury. We should instead focus on changing the offender, or the offending structure, and on the offender’s duty to cease offending.

While all this is certainly true, having an offense committed against oneself does not eradicate one’s moral agency, and with that agency comes a responsibility. In Christian theology, the moral responsibility of the victim is forgiveness, and openness to reconciliation, which in turn implies actively working toward justice and liberation (Sobrino 1994, 65). Likewise, the imperative or duty of *satyagraha* is work by the oppressed toward *moksha*, or liberation, and *swaraj*, or self-rule. Gandhi conceived of these in terms of just relationships, thus in similar terms to the discussion of reconciliation above. *Ahimsa* and non-violence is not passivity, but an active duty required of one who is capable and strong. “The first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating” (Gandhi 1948 vol. II, 53).

Cowardice and ahimsa do not go together any more than water and fire Nonviolence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave. Exercise of nonviolence requires far greater bravery than that of swordsmanship. Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with nonviolence. It (nonviolence) is a conscious deliberate restraint put upon one’s desire for vengeance (Gandhi 1948 vol. I, 243, 59-60; Helmick 2001, 310).

Thus, the moral agency of the victim of oppression is to be active, courageous, and to work toward justice and reconciliation.

The Aim of Reconciliation

I. The Search for Truth

The moral responsibility to work toward reconciliation involves the notion of “truth.” Both *satyagraha* and political forgiveness involve the search for Truth, but this pursuit takes on different connotations in *satyagraha*. For the *satyagrahi*, the phrase “Truth is God” is an ontological statement (Merton 1964, 28; I-414). *Sat* is being, that which exists. *Satya* means that which is in accordance with *Sat* or being, that is, truth. God is, nothing else is (Diwakar 1948, 1). Truth is the absolute principle by which we align our lives. When Gandhi made the pursuit of *satya* an ethical concern, the effect was to transform the absolute or philosophical truth of *Sat* to the relative or practical truth of action (Bondurant 1969, 108-11). Thus, *ahimsa* is not only about the strength and courage to suffer without retaliation, but also about speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly (Merton 1968, 58; II-57).

In political forgiveness, the concept of truth is generally more historical and utilitarian. It comes as part of “moral accounting” or “truth telling” that establishes the historical and moral nature of the wrong. Forgiveness, and thus reconciliation, requires the recognition of differences in culture and understanding of certain events, and the need for telling one’s truth and story (Villa-Vicencio 1997, 30-40). Truth is at least the minimum, and even perhaps the key political mandate for a society (Henkin 1995, 186; Kritz 1995, 491). It legitimizes a government’s actions about past offenses (Kritz 1995). It is the basis of justice – a society purporting to be democratic and thus representing the different groups cannot misrepresent any aspect of its people’s experience (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1995, 57).

II. The Work toward Liberation

Both *satyagraha* and political forgiveness include the victim in the work toward liberation. *Satyagraha* is the work toward *swaraj* and *moksha*. *Swaraj*, or self-rule, was first a moral and personal understanding, which Gandhi imbued with a political connotation. Thus, it came to mean both personal discipline and self government in India (Merton 1964, 5). It is linked with *moksha*, or the liberation of the self from cycles of suffering that Gandhi extended to mean the liberation of India. Liberation of India thus became a religious duty, and the liberation of India was a step toward the liberation of humankind from violence, both from others and themselves (Ibid., 7). Gandhi aimed at three kinds of liberation: 1) to deliver Indian religious wisdom from blindness to injustices; 2) to liberate the Harijan or Dalit (“outcasts”) from political and economic oppression and from their own self-hate and despair; and 3) to liberate oppressors from their blind and hopeless dependence on the system of oppression (Ibid., 16).

Sobrino sees forgiveness as liberation from the lie about ourselves. Forgiveness delivers us from ourselves, and our own truths, and liberates us to recognize God as God actually is. It is not for liberation from the lie that we need forgiveness, and God has not forgiven us. Rather, forgiveness is knowledge of the truth about the nature of ourselves (Sobrino 1994, 93).

Forgiveness also liberates us from social segregation and humiliation, in as much as it sparks change in the other. First, the forgiven person becomes a forgiving one, loved in order to love. Second, more generally, forgiveness sets a person free to express God's love with regard to the world. Liberation from one's personal sin leads one to express and embody to others the love of God that has been experienced. In other words, personal forgiveness leads to liberation praxis in order to take focus off oneself; gratitude from being forgiven leads to the practice of mercy (Sobrino 1994, 67,96).

III. The Work Toward Rebuilding Community

The aims of both *satyagraha* and reconciliation are not only liberation or freedom, but the ultimate goal of renewed or rebuilt community and relationship on a just basis. As stated before, Volf argues that liberation in itself is insufficient; there needs to be reconciliation in the community and the transformation of persons. The purpose of liberation is a just and loving society for all (Merton 1964, 28, II-8). Gandhi says the same: "A non-violent revolution is not a program of seizure of power. It is a program of transformation of relationships, ending in a peaceful transfer of power" (Ibid., 28, II-8).

I suggest that the political expression of community is constitutional democracy. Thus, Gandhi saw democratic government as the outcome of non-violence. "Not all legislation is violence. Legislation imposed by people upon themselves is non-violence to the extent that it is possible in society. . . . That state is perfect and non-violent where the people are governed the least" (Ibid., 54, I-292). In fact, he went further, stating that non-violence is a prerequisite to such a government. "Without the recognition for non-violence on a national scale there is not such thing as a constitutional or democratic government" (Ibid., 53, I-199).

IV. Similarities and Dissimilarities in Method of Action

a. Nonviolence

Both reconciliation and *satyagraha* promote nonviolent action, which operates on the assumption that evil is reversible and can be changed into good, and that we can act accordingly. Reconciliation's emphasis on forgiveness and repentance is aimed at overcoming the effects of evil on the human consciousness and moral action, and changing the cycles of violence and hatred that evil would perpetuate. Nonviolent action assumes that evil can be overcome by the truth that is born in the process, and the suffering that is undertaken by the actors.

Catholic theologian and monk Thomas Merton argues that modern tyrannies are built upon the assumption of the irreversibility of evil. When we see evil as clear-cut and

irreversible, and thus externalize it, our only task is to eliminate it completely. Tyrannies are built on the idea there should never be sin or corruption within the community, and that we can and must eradicate it. For example, Hitler's Nazi Germany operated on this principle of the irreversibility and eradicability of the evil they saw in the Jews – hence the Nazis' unquestioning acceptance of the "Final Solution" and their unquestioning obedience toward their leaders. If evil is perceived as clear, unchanging and irreversible, opposition to evil must be absolute and thus even hesitance to commit violence against the undesired shows that one has already been contaminated by evil. On the other hand, only through our recognition that evil is common and everyday, and our recognition that there is defect and fallibility in our own selves can we become merciful to others. We can see the sin itself as the punishment or consequence, and thus have compassion on sinners. Instead of our eliminating or punishing them, we can see them as already undergoing punishment. We can then empathize with them, suffering their pain as if it were our own. This empathy enables us to be forgiving (Merton 1964, 12-14).

As sin is an everyday occurrence, humans need to be constantly forgiving and constantly releasing. In fact, society can only operate by this constant mutual release. (Bankruptcy laws are an example of a system of economic forgiveness, set up to enable people to take risks and innovate, and thereby enable the economy to function and grow). Nonviolence takes this constant change into account, seeking not to eliminate evil by force, but to change evil into good (Ibid., 14). For example, Gandhi stated that murder can never be avenged by either murder or financial compensation. The only way to avenge murder is to offer oneself as a willing sacrifice, with no desire for retaliation (Ibid., 49, II-131). Merton thus argues that there is an inherent relation between nonviolence and the renewal of India. Violent change would have only initiated a new cycle of violence and oppression. The only real liberation is that which liberates both the oppressor and oppressed at the same time from the tyrannical processes of vengeance, and this is forgiveness (Sobrino 1994, 65).

In some Christian liberation theologies, however, the myth of redemptive violence persists. Unlike Gandhi, Jon Sobrino does not specify non-violence as the only way to reflect forgiveness. Rather, he argues that to hate the sin is to eradicate it, "and objectively, this is a violent action against the sinner" (Ibid., 65). Love entails doing good where there is evil, transforming evil into good. There is possibly some coercion involved, and this includes the stance of knowing what is good for the sinner (Ibid., 63).

Sobrino argues that through love, we make it impossible for offenders to continue with their deeds, which dehumanize themselves and others. Liberation from oppression means destroying the person oppressing, "*in his formal capacity as oppressor*" (Sobrino 1994, 65). There is thus a limitation on the amount of destruction permissible. A tension exists between what are perceived as the needs of love, expressed in forgiveness, and of justice, expressed as destruction of the oppressor as oppressor. There is a tension between forgiving reality, and thus changing it, and forgiving the sinner (Ibid., 64). Sobrino argues that we integrate the tension between love and destruction with "great love" (Ibid., 65).

I suggest that there is a distinction between violence and force, violence being excessive or an intentionally destructive force, which is not warranted to procure justice or to prevent further harm. This leads to the question whether there can be force that is

neither excessive in the attempt to reach a legitimate end, nor intentionally destructive, in the name of love, and thus consistent with reconciliation. There are an array of opinions in Christian theology as to the legitimate use of physical force, reflected in the historic debate between just war theory and pacifism (Cahill 1994). Related to this debate is the acceptance by theologians such as Martin Luther that police power, or legitimate state sanctioned force to control chaos and reduce evil and defend vulnerable persons, can be exercised in love. In light of this, one could argue that love would *limit* but not *prohibit* physical force, that is, love and thus reconciliation would limit force to legitimate police power and retributive punishment, or to just war, and nothing more.

Thus, perhaps some (but not all) of the difference between Christian reconciliation and *satyagraha* is semantic and positional. Both *satyagraha* and reconciliation eschew violence, that is, excessive and destructive force of any kind. *Satyagraha*, nonviolent action by those who are oppressed and do not have state authority to exercise police power, eschews all physical force. Reconciliation does not necessarily prohibit physical force in pursuit of justice. In addition, reconciliation can also include action when there is legitimate state sanction to exercise police power, but prohibits the excessive and vengeful use of this power.

b. Moral Meaning of Suffering

The two precepts also attribute moral meaning to suffering. First, forgiveness and *satyagraha* presuppose positions of strength. They both occur instead of vengeance or violence. The offended has a superior moral position, with a right to retribution, restitution or even vengeance. When she gives up this debt, she may suffer. Suffering in the context of forgiveness and *satyagraha* must be voluntary, and when it occurs, shows courage and strength (Bondurant 1969, 28).

From Sobrino's perspective, taking seriously the call to forgive, and incarnating the love of God in the world also may well mean suffering. When we "forgive" and oppose sin, we may well suffer under the forces of destruction – danger, persecution, and death (Sobrino 1994, 61-62). Likewise, Erasmus contended, "If you can avoid evil by suffering it yourself, do so. ... The greater your position the more ready you ought to be to forgive another's crime" (Merton 1964, 15). Merton suggests that this means one can overcome evil by taking it upon oneself. The only way truly to "overcome" the enemy is to help him become other than an enemy, even if it means suffering (Ibid., 15).

Suffering is the third principle of *satyagraha*. Gandhi said, "Nonviolence is impossible without self-purification" (Ibid. 1964, 44, I-245). In fact,

... Freedom and slavery are mental states. . . [S]ay to yourself, 'I shall no longer accept the role of a slave. I shall not obey orders as such but shall disobey when they are in conflict with my conscience.' . . . This may mean suffering. Your readiness to suffer will light the torch of freedom which can never be put out. (Ibid. 56, II-10)

However effective suffering might be as a tactic for raising consciousness, Gandhi never advocated suffering for its own sake. He believed that the sight of suffering on the part of the multitudes would melt the heart of the aggressor and induce cessation of violence (Helmick 2001, 308). This is an important point. The moral meaning or redemptive value does not apply to suffering that is imposed or forced; neither is it about meaning that is articulated for someone else, especially by the offender for the offended. Rather, it applies to suffering that is voluntarily undergone in the service of the principles of forgiveness and *satyagraha*.

VI. Conclusion

Although there are many similarities in end and content between reconciliation and *satyagraha*, there are also nuances that enrich the meanings of each. Both reconciliation and *satyagraha* work to overcome past oppression and injustice, and ultimately rebuild a just and peaceful community. Both attribute some moral responsibility to the victim, as well as the oppressor, to making this happen. Both see some form of moral meaning in voluntary suffering.

The primary difference noted in this article is in the possibility of the use of limited force. While *satyagraha* eschews violence and physical force of any kind, there is the possibility in reconciliation for the limited use of physical force to achieve just and peaceful ends. There are Christian theologians who argue that at times a minimum force might be necessary for police powers, for cessation of oppression, or for retributive justice. In addition, reconciliation can include the notion of legitimate state sanctioned police power.

Finally, in both reconciliation and *satyagraha*, means and ends are related and work together. Gandhi stated that *ahimsa* is not the goal; truth is the goal. A steadfast pursuit of *ahimsa* is inevitably bound to truth (Helmick 2001, 311). Truth, *Sat*, and nonviolence, *ahimsa* are intertwined, and held together in the God of love (Ibid. 312). There is intrinsic connection between means and ends. The means is the end in process and the ideal in the making (Shridharani 1939, 316, 34). "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. ... We reap exactly as we sow. (Gandhi, 10), Impure means result in an impure end (Merton 1964, 62, II-274). Likewise, in the ongoing process of reconciliation, forgiveness, repentance, love and justice are intertwined, and our actions must be consonant with the outcome. Reconciliation is both the means and the end. The lesson of both *satyagraha* and reconciliation is that our moral obligation is to act with the understanding that the right means often also lead to the right outcome.

Notes

¹ See, e.g. R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., Inc., 2000); Glen H. Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1998).

² 2 Corinthians . 5:18-19 states:

All this [new life in Christ] is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (NRSV)

³ Sobrino incorporates notions of justice into his discussion of forgiveness; thus he discusses a process that is not simply forgiveness as I term it here, but one that approaches reconciliation.

⁴ Volf argues that the dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor is not helpful for reconciliation, as in many instances the liberated become the oppressed.

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