ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi developed an integrated world view within the very specific contexts of his struggles for justice and freedom in South Africa and India. Much of his thought regarding such basic concepts as Satyagraha (clinging to truth), ahimsa (nonviolence), swaraj (self-determination, independence), and sarvodaya (the welfare of all) was articulated in the light of the concrete struggles he encountered. Some scholars have undertaken the task of extrapolating Gandhi’s world view in terms of a general philosophy of liberation (see Iyer, 1973; Jesudasan, 1984; Prabhu & Rao, 1967; Richards 1991). However, these studies have not generally extrapolated the theme of world federalism that Gandhi occasionally mentions in his writings. This paper argues that Gandhi’s relevance for the 21st century requires delineating the larger scope of his vision in relation to our contemporary situation and seeing the possibility of concretely actualizing that vision within the world federalism advocated by the Constitution for the Federation of Earth (see Martin 2010a).

INTRODUCTION

Many studies correctly focus on Satyagraha as a “clinging to truth” integral to the struggle against injustice and oppressive government. They understand Satyagraha as a form of nonviolent resistance dedicated to breaking the cycle of violence and winning over the oppressors through transforming their hearts, allowing them to recognize the gigantic Truth that encompasses us all. For example, Ken Jones in The Social Face of Buddhism, declares that:

The philosophy of creative nonviolence recognizes that protester and adversary are caught up in the same historical web of socially supercharged bitterness and antagonism . . . fear, ill will, acquisitiveness, and existential blindness. The so-called “method” of nonviolence by which the specific affliction is to be removed is therefore more important than the specific question at issue, for it seeks to help undercut
the human roots from which afflictions arise again and again. It does this by seeking to bring into the awareness of the adversary the suffering which arises from greed and domination, and also to share with him something of a higher level of consciousness through the experience of mutual respect, genuine communication and some recognition of ultimate common interest. (Jones, 1989, p. 303)

While clearly fundamental, this focus on Satyagraha as resistance omits the deeper moral and theoretical framework implicit in Mahatma Gandhi’s work that points toward a transformed conception of human life, society, and the role of government. This article attempts to extrapolate the ways in which Gandhi’s thought suggests the development of the global rule of law, administered by persons awakened to the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life (summarized as Satyagraha), and therefore to the significance of nonviolence in thought, word, and deed within every sphere of life.

AHIMSA AND HIMSA

Like most philosophers of nonviolent social change, Gandhi never repudiated all use of force. He believed it was morally acceptable and pragmatically important for Indian soldiers to fight on the side of the British in World War One (Jesudasan, 1984, p. 54). He declared that if one lacked the courage to stand against injustice by nonviolent means, one should acquire the force of arms. Worse than using force is cowardice – refusing to stand against injustice out of fear: “I have been repeating over and over again,” he writes, “that he who cannot protect himself or his nearest and dearest or their honor by nonviolently facing death may and ought to do so by violently dealing with the oppressor” (Prabhu and Rao, 1967, p. 144). For Gandhi, bodily life, as well as complex social life, occasionally required himsa. Ahimsa should not become a fetish that made practical functioning an impossibility (Richards, 1991, pp. 36-37).

The perspective here should be clearly distinguished from the idea of violence as a “last resort,” often appealed to by the defenders of violence as the final option when all else has failed. This perspective opens the door to militarized organized violence in defense of freedom or in revolutionary opposition to an oppressor. For Gandhi, nonviolence means an activation of a universal potential of our humanity, the realization of the deeper selfhood within us that we all share. Ahimsa, like Satyagraha, means that we and our institutions must be focused on clinging to the great Truth of our common humanity and our universal human situation.

If we do this, then any use of force will necessarily be premised on the minimum necessary to protect everyone involved. Under democratic government, a civilian police force could be trained in the minimum use of necessary force, protecting both the individual arrested and all bystanders. Gandhi stresses that the crucial element here is the intention behind the use of force. The necessary minimum use of force can never be militarized or directed toward intentional harm of a perceived “enemy.” “The essence of violence,” he declared, “is that there must be a violent intention behind the thought, word, or act, i.e., an intention to do harm to the opponent so-called” (Kripalani, 1972, p. 91). An individual defending his or her family or civilian police seeking to arrest a person might use the minimum necessary force with the non-attached love (agape) of the New Testament or the karma yoga of the Bhagavad Gita – that is, without hatred or malice that desires to inflict suffering on a perceived enemy.

The concrete world in which we live requires that we deal effectively with dangerous institutions like militarized nation-states, dangerous forces like terrorism, and occasionally dangerous people. The task is to deal practically and justly with all these dangers without ourselves sinking into the cycle of