CONFLICT, NON-VIOLENCE AND DISCIPLESHIP

By BEDE SMITH

TO MANY the term 'conflict' implies violence. Conversely, 'peace' taken as its opposite implies the absence of conflict. It may be that in some final time, when *shalom* in its fullness is achieved, peace will mean an absence of conflict. But for the time being at least, our peace is more piecemeal as Hopkins[1] describes it. Be that a 'poor peace' or not, it is often isolated and precarious, short-lived, with rather constant shadows of conflict and 'alarms of war' not far removed. However one theologically accounts for them, conflicts are a part of every Christian's personal and social life and form the context of the national and international reality in which we live. Christians becoming more aware of their participation and active role in dealing with conflicts reflect on this to create a theology of conflict. One part of that reflection is the relationship between conflict and violence and the search for ways to resolve conflicts through creative and non-violent alternatives.

Ever since the hope for an imminent parousia receded, Christians have had to become more at home in this world. Images describing their relationship to the present world, and particularly the present world as marked by evil, affect the stances Christians take in their involvement with the social realities. A two-layered vision of the world as the City of God and the City of Man as proposed by St Augustine leads to a certain resignation before the evil present in the world and a general disdain or intolerance for the consequences of sin present there. By contrast, a creation theology relates us to a world that is emerging through tensions and conflicts which are likened to the birth-pangs of the mother with humankind serving a maieutic function in cooperation with the Creator in that birth. From these two distinct visions of the world, violence has a different explanation and conflict serves a different purpose. In the first, conflict is the inevitable consequence of a fallen world and violence

its first fruits. The Christian must do as best he/she can to live pure and unstained, avoiding the conflict and suffering the violence that is its consequence. In fact, the Christian may be called upon to use force (and violence) as the lesser of evils in dealing with the violence encountered there. The just war theory had its origins in this concession of violence as a response to greater violence. In the creation model, conflict is related to the tensions of polar forces or values that can creatively interact to produce an emergent synthesis through dialectic process. Conflict contains the energy for growth that potentially, if not inevitably, leads to an ongoing creative process, whether that be in terms of personal growth, social change or world process. This second vision is more hopeful, perhaps utopian. It can be criticized for its almost cavalier dismissal of the very real and horrible consequences of conflicts, war, violence and destruction. However, because it is more hopeful, it sustains Christians who actively involve themselves in human conflicts and seek non-violent solutions to these conflicts on all levels. It is the conviction about things we do not see (Heb 11,1) that is called faith.

New theologies of the Kingdom of God, nurtured by the straining for liberation, have dissolved the boundaries between 'this world' and our 'heavenly home' that was marked by death as the individual boundary and transition point. By seeing the Kingdom of God as the announcement of God's reign in this world, the tension wholly immersed in this world is between the signs of the Kingdom already here and the emerging possibilities that are not yet present but actively hoped for. Often beginning with the struggles of the poor and the marginalized, social conflicts and the transformation of societies to conform them to the Kingdom are the theological loci for the emerging Kingdom and the call to discipleship. Dealing with conflicts on interpersonal, social, and international levels is the sign that christian witness is bringing about the Kingdom. The presence of conflict on any level in turn contains the potential for violence. The christian challenge is precisely to make possible transformation of society by methods that reduce violence. The context is one of conflict and struggle.

Out of this christian witness in the midst of struggle and conflict, especially on the social or structural level, the term 'non-violence' has become a new ethical category and even a spirituality. It has come to be the most apt term to summarize the ethic of social change and a spirituality of active involvement in that change which

expresses how people experience the imperative of discipleship to Jesus in his inauguration of the reign of God.

A number of factors seem to be contributing to this assimilation of a new vocabulary and life-style. It is not that non-violence is a new christian reality but that, in responding to particular social and political realities, non-violence is that name for applying christian charity to structural change. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed it as an alternative not between violence and non-violence but between non-violence and non-existence. In the world we have created through the technology of armaments, the alternative to non-violent solutions to international conflict could well be annihilation. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world (no 80) calls for a 'completely fresh appraisal of war'. Even without the extreme destruction of nuclear conflict, contemporary weaponry with its state-of-the-art technology and proliferation challenges us to find creative alternatives to violent resolution of conflict. Even the ongoing state of hostage, under which humankind lives by the policy of deterrence by nuclear weapons, makes us rethink the basic absurdity in the use of violence for the resolution of any conflict.

Gene Sharp has done a great service in validating non-violent actions as an effective method of social change through his work *The politics of non-violent action*.[2] With innumerable historical examples he shows its effectiveness. He also explains why non-violence is not usually recognized as effective. It is easier to romanticize the more dramatic and heroic acts of violence and popular histories are replete with them. Historians simply assume the popular assumption that violence is the only significant form of combat. Histories of wars overload the history shelf, filled with battles and dates and names of war heroes. Assumptions are made about the violence of human nature so non-violence is downplayed. The lack of a conceptual system for relating non-violent actions causes them to be lost through the slats of history. When war histories are narrated, failures are ascribed to battles or tactics or strategies, not to violence as such. When non-violent actions are ineffective, non-violence as such is regarded as ineffective. Very often too, leaders of non-violent actions did not have the precedence of training for non-violence as military leaders have had for their violent actions. This last consideration may be changing as more literature is available on non-violence and training sessions are developed. But in a recent address in London, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, the non-

violent leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 1981, stressed the constant need of creativity in planning and executing non-violent actions, even though one may have read Gandhi or Martin Luther King as he had.

The consistent and widespread effectiveness of non-violent witnesses in modern times has contributed greatly to the new attention it is receiving. Many, though not all, of these witnesses have been christian and have seen their non-violent actions as the direct expression of their commitment to the gospel and discipleship of Jesus. It is a wonderful irony that the father of non-violence in modern times is Gandhi, a Hindu who came to his insights and commitment through reading christian sources. He had been exposed to Tolstoy, Thoreau, Ruskin and especially the New Testament. This led him to draw from the wells of his own spiritual heritage and the political experiences of South Africa and indian independence. As Thomas Merton commented,[3] in looking West and seeing the good in its spiritual heritage, he also discovered his own—and not just his own heritage, but what is universal in the spiritual tradition common to East and West.

From his jain background he appropriated and deepened the sense of *ahimsa*, the principle of non-harm. This he related to the injunction of the Sermon on the Mount not to return evil for evil, not to strike back (Mt 5,39). This had been rendered as not resisting evil, and the term non-resistance came to be used first for his political actions. In searching for a term to describe better the active nature of his non-violent actions and its spiritual roots, he used the word *satyagraha* which literally means to cling to the truth or reality. This came later to be rendered in English as 'soul force' or 'love force', terms that convey the active strength. A component of the concept too he derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* in the sense of duty, *nishkama karma*, doing one's duty without regard to the consequences, praise or blame, status or reward, loss or suffering.[4] In the gradual accommodation of concepts from East and West honed by his own political experiences with non-violent actions, Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence was both singularly his own and universally resonant with people of many cultures and religions.

One such resonating response was in the mind and heart of a young black seminary student from Atlanta, Georgia, who listened to his ideas through a speaker who came to talk in Philadelphia, Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson. The young man was Martin Luther

King Jr. 'He (Gandhi) was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful effective social force on a large scale.'[5] He had been struggling with his own experience of racism and was beginning to doubt whether the ministry was a career in which he could effect any changes, given the style of baptist preaching he had been brought up with. His own formation would continue with studies at Boston University through christian personalism and hegelian dialectics. But it was when he arrived at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, for his first pastorate that he was baptized in non-violent actions. A bright young woman returning from work, Rosa Parks, was just too tired to move from her seat when asked to stand and move to the segregated section of the bus. She was taken to the police station for violating the city ordinance. The Montgomery boycott lasted for a year and confirmed King in his non-violent convictions. Even when later the Black Power movement began to shake the civil rights effort from its non-violent commitment, King reaffirmed that even if all Blacks should turn to violence, he would not.

These two giants of non-violent leadership, Gandhi and King, have created a climate throughout the world that allows non-violence a hearing as a powerful and effective tool for social change. Almost every nation can add to the list of non-violent leaders: Cesar Chavez, Lech Wałesa, Andrei Sakharov, Albert Luthuli, Kenneth Kaunda, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Oscar Romero, Danilo Dolci, Dorothy Day, Dom Helder Camara. And beyond the leaders with names are the countless and innumerable 'cloud of witnesses' that have constituted the strength of non-violent efforts through the world.

Catholics among others have been influenced by this growing consciousness of non-violence. It seems that the Church is reclaiming her non-violent tradition, or moving it from the periphery closer to the centre of its life. Catholics share the general christian pre-reformation heritage. Along with other Christians we recall the early christian history of pacifism and definite reluctance to participate in the military prior to the fourth century and the conversion of Constantine. With the rise of Christendom, the assimilation of the culture as christian and the gradual alignment of the Church with the power structures, there came the gradual complicity with violence. Despite sporadic and limited attempts to contain warfare such as the Truce of God, Christians became more

accustomed to bearing arms, even in the name of God as in the efforts of the crusades. Alongside the sword there were the non-violent history of monasticism, St Francis and the witness of missionaries and martyrs who may have accompanied violence in the efforts of colonization but were also witnesses and voices against violence.

Following the Reformation, there arose denominations that preserved more consistently the christian commitment to non-violence and pacifism. These are the traditional 'peace' Churches: Quakers, Mennonites, and the Church of the Brethren. Aside from the ongoing witness of individuals, both religious and lay, whose humble service to the poor was ever present, the Catholic Church does not stand out as an advocate of non-violence and pacifism. Beginning with Pius XII in modern times, the voice of the Church becomes a clearer clarion for peace and non-violence. The tradition of the just war seemed to justify involvement in wars of self-defence such as those of our own century. After World War II, new voices began to emerge in the United States with the Vietnam war. Before this Dorothy Day and those associated with the Catholic Worker Movement were labelled 'activist' and easily dismissed. Thomas Merton from his monastery was a beacon.

Then came the Berrigan brothers. Gradually the involvement in non-violent actions and even civil disobedience is less identified with particular names. Rather it is many people involved in Peace Pentecost demonstrations, witnesses along the borders of Nicaragua, persons risking arrest in the Sanctuary movement for salvadoran refugees, the accumulating number of persons serving time in jail for ploughshares actions, (i.e. some form of interference with military installations), the myriads of people required to encircle Greenham Common in the United Kingdom, the thousands who have participated in actions related to the 'disappeared—*desaparecidos*'. It is a solidarity of witnesses that includes Catholics but reaches ecumenically far beyond.

The american bishops' pastoral on war and peace is a significant document in this reclamation of the non-violent heritage. The document talks of two options for the Kingdom, non-violence and the just war theory, and they are called complementary. The place of the just war theory is somewhat weakened and readers of the pastoral can see it being challenged in effect because of its increased irrelevance in dealing with modern warfare. Its principles of discrimination and proportionality rule out modern warfare. As

though entering by the back door, non-violence becomes the position of the Church.[6]

Catholics along with others are reading the New Testament to see more clearly the centrality of non-violence in Jesus's own message. Thanks also to post-Vatican II appreciation of God's Word and scripture, many are feeling, as they read the New Testament more directly, that somehow the Church had gradually abdicated its fidelity to that non-violent message. Some may blame the just war tradition which, instead of being a curb to the legitimation of war and violence, seems to have been used more as a justification for violence.

In Jesus's own choices, through the events of his life, and in his words, we see a clear and definite choice for the way of non-violence in a world where violence was expected. His choice of the 'suffering servant' role was an option for non-violence. The lamb of God symbol of naming Jesus was identification with a mute sacrificial animal, not the lion of war. Jesus's choice to ride a donkey into Jerusalem rather than a horse was an option for non-violent entry into the city, since the horse was a symbol of war identified with chariots. Generally these symbols are interpreted as Jesus's personal self-description that he is 'meek and humble of heart'. Yet their political implication is seldom drawn. How radically different is the 'reign' that Jesus is intending to inaugurate and how different the style of life consonant with this 'rule'. The cross is the final symbol of that identification. The cross was the execution of the criminal, filled with opprobrium and violence. Jesus's own message from the cross was one of forgiveness not retaliation. Before Pilate he declined the power available to him. He had Zealots among his disciples, but clearly distinguished himself from their political goals of fomenting violent rebellion against the roman occupation. Jesus reaches out to the marginalized and outcasts by empowering them through awareness of their subjectivity and worth, but he does not encourage them to seek liberation through violence.

Efforts to relate non-violence to the christian ethic have generally taken the form of identifying non-violence with Jesus's virtue of gentleness and meekness. This psychological interpretation tends to privatize the idea of non-violence which we usually associate with social transformation or political actions when we use the term. Perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to relate non-violence with discipleship and the Kingdom. To be Jesus's disciple

is to put on the mind and heart of Jesus through the power of the Spirit given to us. To do this is to be concerned with the Kingdom as Jesus was, and to act out that commitment as Jesus did, that is, through actions that are consonant with the Kingdom itself, namely, non-violent ones. At the centre of the Church's social doctrine shines the dignity of the human person. Because each person, without distinction, is the image of God, all are to be treated with the respect commensurate to that dignity. In society that dignity is expressed by rights protected by structures in the form of laws and institutions. When these do not obtain, Christians have the obligation to bring them about. The only process that can do this without itself offending that same respect would be non-violent. Non-violence is a quality of any action that brings about gospel values or that is itself consistent with gospel values. To the extent that violence enters into these actions, they depart from the gospel. Whether all political actions can be 'purified' of violence is the ongoing challenge to christian involvement. But, as in the case of serving in war as a Christian, it has not always been easy for Christians to escape some complicity with violence. Unavoidable complicity however, does not condone violence.

Perhaps the two visions of the world introduced earlier, one tainted by evil (City of Man) and the other, an emerging creation, will remain as contrasting and complementary models from which the relation between violence and conflict can be viewed. Francis X. Meehan[7] has a very insightful reflection on viewing development of doctrine in the context of such dualities. Each perhaps is a corrective view to the other. Lest we become too sanguine about the inevitability of growth, we need to keep in mind the reality of a struggle with evil represented by Augustine's model. But lest we give up hope that the Kingdom can emerge and that the hovering clouds of potential nuclear holocaust can be dissipated, we need the vision of an emergent creation that was born during the birthpangs of Calvary by the Lord of the universe who chose non-violence and forgiveness of the enemy as the Way.

NOTES

[1] 'Peace.' *Poems and prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W. H. Gardner (ed.) (Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1975), p 42.

[2] *The politics of non-violent action* (Porter Sargent Publishers, Boston, 1973).

[3] *Gandhi on non-violence*, Thomas Merton (ed. with introduction) (New Directions, New York, 1965), pp 3–4.

[4] See Bishop, Peter D.: *A technique for loving: non-violence in indian and christian traditions* (SCM

Press Ltd, London, 1981), for a clear explanation of eastern and western religious influences on Gandhi.

[5] Oates, Stephen, B.: *Let the trumpet sound: the life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Harper & Row, New York, 1982), p 32.

[6] See Meehan, Francis X.: 'Non-violence and the bishops' Pastoral Letter', *Thought*, March 1984, for a reflection on the relation between non-violence and the just war theory as a case for development of doctrine.

[7] *Ibid.*