

GHANDI'S NONVIOLENCE CONCEPT: A PANACEA FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria had witnessed several insecurity challenges and impediments to developmental agendas. However, there is considerable interest at resolving the root cause(s) of these violent acts. Some studies identified a symbiotic relationship between political corruptions and unresolved grievances in governance as the foundational root causes. While other studies averred that the significance of religion as a force in social life had been structurally impaired.

The aim of this study is to examine the relevance of Gandhi's theory of nonviolence as a solution to violent crisis, in the contemporary Nigerian society. To achieve its slated objectives, the research employs an expository, historical and critical analysis of data that were sourced from the news media outputs, academic publications and the use of inductive and deductive reasoning.

The methods will enable us discover the variables that often influence episodes of violent acts in Nigeria. Hence, the significance of Gandhi's concept of nonviolence will be accessed in the light of the insecurity challenges witnessed in the contemporary Nigerian society.

The study concludes that, Gandhi's non-violence principle laid credence solutions to the following problems: (a) a country struggling or divided along political and ideological parameters (b) a country with inequitable wealth allocation and social class struggle. (c) Sectarian violence and barriers to genuine dialogue (e) Religious fundamentalism, among others.

KEYWORDS

Nonviolence, Panacea, Co-existence, Contemporary, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Nigerian society has become a theatre of genocide, bloodshed, mistrust, unrest and insecurity over the past years. Nigeria's political and historical life have often been characterized and marred with violence that are political, religious, and ethnic or electoral¹. Oftentimes, it is practically difficult to establish the root cause(s) of this disastrous phenomenon which has threatened the sustainability of the federation. However, such threats to the nation's sustainability, has led to mass internally displaced people (IDP), impediments to social and infrastructural development, increase in poverty rate, long standing grievances, injustices,

inequality in access to state resources etcetera, which oftentimes fuels the outburst of violent crisis, that impede social and infrastructural development of the country.

Nevertheless, the philosophy of non-violence expounded by Gandhi can be utilized such that addresses insecurity challenges in Nigeria. The exponent's thesis is that conflicts and the violent means of achieving egalitarian society should be exchanged for peaceful means which can guarantee political or social changes. Hence, the presupposition that the rejection of the use of violence, by protesters who seeks the redress of collective concerns, the sectarian terrorists groups with their expectations clothed in sadistic outburst negating dialogue, etcetera should put an end to conflict that brings about political, economic and social changes. Thus Gandhi offers an appealing moral injunction, the conviction that those who practice nonviolence could achieve lasting peace through peaceful means.

The thrust of the paper is to explore ways of non-violence implementations towards building a just and peaceful Nigerian society while emphasizing the constructive response to the phenomena of tension and violent crisis in the contemporary Nigerian society. In order to achieve this aim, the study examines several variable factors that can help in the explanations of the relationship between religion, politics, violence and terrorism in Nigeria. The study discovers that there are religious, ethnic, political, economical, and social variables that influence these violent acts.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

It is vital to clarify certain terminologies used in this paper. They include: *Violence*, *Nonviolence*, and *Peace*.

Violence could be defined as “an act of aggression; a turbulent state resulting in injuries and destruction; ferocity: the property of being wild or turbulent”.² A more comprehensive definition is that of Cadfy who defines it as “physical and non-physical harm that causes damage, pain, injury or fear.”³ However, while violence may be physical or non-physical, and while its immediate target may be either human beings or material structures, its ultimate goal is usually to destroy the existence or degrade the dignity of a person or group of persons.⁴ This definition is considered sufficiently comprehensive and is therefore adopted for the purpose of this paper.

Nonviolence could mean: (1) the principle of refraining from using violence especially as a means of protest, (2) the absence of or freedom from violence.⁵ However, some are of the view that “nonviolence” is simply a “philosophy” and deeply rooted in the belief that God is harmless. For example, the Ghandian Ahimsa is a philosophy and strategy for social change that rejects the use of violence, but at the same time sees nonviolent action (also called civil resistance) as an alternative to passive acceptance of oppression or armed struggle against it.

Peace is said to be relative and as such is a concept that seems to have defied any universally acceptable definition. A variety of ways of defining the concept of peace include ideas such as absence of war, violence or conflict; a state of law or social contract; a balance of power etc. For the purpose of this paper, we adopt an empirical definition rooted in social context. According to Christopher, peace may be defined as: “an atmosphere of tolerance, harmonious coexistence and mutual development; an atmosphere where people are not only aware of their differences but are also understanding and willing to live and work together”.⁶

GHANDHI'S NONVIOLENCE CONCEPT

Ahimsa is a Sanskrit term meaning 'to not injure'. The word is derived from the Sanskrit root *hims*-to strike; *himsa* is injury or harm, *a-himsa* is the opposite of this, i.e. cause no injury, do no harm. Ahimsa is thus referred to as nonviolence, and is a multidimensional concept, inspired by the premise that all living beings have the spark of the divine spiritual energy and to hurt another being is to hurt oneself⁷. Ahimsa has also been related to the notion that every action, particularly violence; equals negative karmic consequences. Suffice it to say that the concept of 'Ahimsa' gained an extraordinary status in the ethical philosophy of Gandhi; who was influenced most parts by the religious tenets of Jainism an Indian religion.

As noted, the concept of Non-Violence is central to Gandhi's philosophy. According to Gandhi, Non-Violence means 'love': love towards all living creatures. Which means non-violence practice is to be extended to all sentient creatures. When the idea of Non-Violence in Gandhi's philosophy is critically examined, it surfaces three ultimate values:

1. It has a universal appeal.
2. Secondly, it propels the upsurge of other moral virtues i.e. patience, understanding, tolerance, etc.
3. Thirdly, it is unconstrained in its application i.e its usage is multidimensional.

Gandhi stated that the Divine Spark is present within man and we must constantly endeavor to keep alive that Divine Spark. Gandhi therefore regarded Non-Violence to be the law of our species.⁸ Nonviolence is the cultivation of positive attitudes towards living beings. Hence, it represents the basic and essential qualities of mankind and if Non-Violence is the expression of the life-instinct within man then violence is the expression of the death-instinct⁹.

For Gandhi, Truth and Non-violence are two inseparable terminologies. In the Sanskrit term, Truth and Non-Violence are "*Satya*" and "*Ahimsa*" respectively. These two ingredients stand as the basis of Gandhi's philosophy. He buttressed that the word 'Satya' comes from the word 'Sat' that means 'to exist'. So by the term 'Satya', Gandhi also means that which is not only existent but also true¹⁰. Gandhi correlates truth with God. He buttressed:

There is nothing besides Truth. So both Truth and God stands for the highest reality or the ultimate reality. And hence the two can be identified together. No one on earth can deny Truth. God can be denied because the atheist does not believe in God. But the atheist cannot deny the power of Truth. Hence God is identified with truth¹¹.

So, Truth and Non-Violence are two sides of the same coin. The effectiveness of non-violence as a weapon against communal strife was proved by Gandhi in the struggle against the British. Ahimsa (nonviolence) is not a timid response to oppressive circumstances but rather it is prerequisite for the morally vigilant and the active. Evil, he believes can be overcome with good and invariably a respect for the sanctity of life. Nonviolence is essentially based on love. In fact, Satyagraha appears to be as a religious pursuit. It rests on a religious belief that there is one God behind everything and being, and as such careful consideration must be taken to peaceful dealings with all and sundry.

Gandhi nonviolence concept emphasizes on the display of kindness to all living creatures. This emphasis laid on the sacredness of life is understandable when kindness takes preference in all that is thought or done. While writing about the sacredness of life, he succinctly remarked:

I take it that the sacredness of human life has been taken for granted. Ahimsa is the highest ideal. It is meant for the brave, never for the cowardly. To benefit by others' killing and delude oneself into the belief that one is being very religious and non-violent is sheer self-deception.¹²

Ghandian nonviolence is the expression of divine love, compassion and the manifestation of humanity that comprehends a positive holistic attitude to building a new humanity based on love. The Gandhian principle can be summed up as follows:

1. Mutual Respect 2. Understanding 3. Acceptance 4. Appreciating differences 5. Truth and Truth fullness 6. Absorbing suffering 7. Ahimsa (non-violence) 8. Trusteeship and Constructive Action.

The above principles postulated by Mahatma Gandhi have universal applicability across ages. And about ten years later, Martin Luther King adopted Gandhi's non-violent methods in his Promoting Principles of Non-violence for Conflict Resolution struggle to win civil rights for African Americans.

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RELEVANCE OF NON-VIOLENCE TO CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY.

The principle of nonviolence has great relevance in contemporary Nigerian society. Nonviolence, both in theory and practice can and should be viewed as a positive, active and potent force for attaining certain beneficiary goals. As observed earlier, the use of force as a strategy has failed; dialogue and consultation should serve as potent alternatives.

The cynical manipulation of religion by the Nigerian state has led to a combative dimension in Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Complicating matters, different kinds of religio-political conspiracies have engulfed Nigeria since the 1980s, and these have ultimately destabilized civil society in many parts of the country.¹³ In a country that is already fragile and constantly teetering on the verge of dissolution, religious crisis presents a considerable challenge.

Consequently, non-violent strategies offers three core processes aimed at healing and resolving deep- seated conflicts. These three core processes are self-empathy, empathy for another and honest self-expression. The honest self-expression process consists of five functional and interrelated process directed at resolving conflict. These are:

- (i) Observing without evaluation, judgment or analysis;
- (ii) Looking for feelings behind words that are expressed;
- (iii) Looking for unmet needs, connected to these feelings, evaluating which needs are not (yet) being met instead of evaluating action in "right" or "wrong";
- (iv) Making request how another person could enrich life. Essential in this is that the other person is to be left free to honor or decline the right.

Conflicts can be resolved when we can resort to an antonym of violence that is non violence. Non-violence is a way of life. It is also a means to make social, political and economic change. Non-violence seeks to empower communities and individuals. It works to help people find power, not power over others. The core values of non-violence are respect for life, and the pursuit of justice and dignity for all humanity which reflect key values from the world's main spiritual traditions. Non-violence, according to advocates is neither merely a negation of violence, nor a call for passivism. Proponents of non-violence do not deny that conflict among human beings is inevitable, and they do not support submission to persecution, obedience to unjust authorities or acceptance of conditions in which their own or others human rights are violated. To those who argue that violence is a natural human response to feelings of threat or fear, or that humans are naturally capable of doing evil, they respond that human beings have just as naturally a unique capacity for reason and a propensity to do good. Thus, violence and non-violence are but two opposing ways of responding to conflict, and humans may choose to practice one or the other. However, violent action contravenes rights granted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes:

- The right to life, liberty and security of person;
- The right not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
- The right to equal protection by the law;
- The right to the protection by the law against attacks upon one's honors and reputation;
- The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and
- The right to freedom of opinion and expression¹⁴

In addition, there is a widespread assumption in contemporary Nigeria, that poverty is one of the major sources of violence, despite there being no direct causal relationship between the two. Although today most violent conflicts take place in poor communities, they do not necessarily occur in the poorest of them, nor are all poor societies involved in conflict. Some middle-income communities are also prone to violent upheaval. The risk of conflict is highest where there is real or perceived oppression of groups and institutional mechanisms are unable to manage grievances peacefully. Nevertheless, one-third of the world's poorest people (those living on less than \$1 per day) live in "fragile states", characterized by weak governance and often prone to conflict. Conflict affects everyone, but may have greater impacts on the poor and the marginalized (especially women and children), because they are least able to protect themselves and are most vulnerable to shocks. At the same time, discrimination in the allocation of economic, social and political resources is often aggravated by conflict and in post-conflict contexts. Addressing unequal and discriminatory root causes of poverty both horizontally (across social, religious and ethnic groups) and vertically (citizens, civil society and government) is vital to achieving development and conflict prevention or recovery goals in contemporary Nigeria.

Additionally, the gains of interreligious harmony on the level of civil society will become meaningless if Christians and Muslims in Nigeria cannot develop the capacity to live with the challenges of pluralism. The other challenge for Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is to develop an ideology of dialogue that can mobilize them to see through the perfidy of the nation-state and the virulent machinations of self-proclaimed religious demagogues¹⁵. Dialogue is not the obliteration of religious particularities; it is the recognition that plurality within the human family, including religious plurality, should not be allowed to be the source of conflict and crisis.

Interreligious dialogue presents the most credible way to control the noxious tide of religious fanaticism and philistinism across Nigeria.

Thus, nonviolent direct action, as employed by such persons as Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin L. King, as an alternative to violent resolution tends to focus upon the role of violence in social change, but persons such as Gene Sharp and George Lakey argue that nonviolent strategies have often played a predominant role in bringing about fundamental social change.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

It has been affirmed that violence and terrorism is totally unacceptable in all ramifications especially in an ethical sense. This stand goes with the need to address the root cause(s) of violence and terrorism in contemporary Nigeria. Hence, the key ingredients of Ghandhi's nonviolence can be summarized as: a belief in unity of and the sanctity of life, respect for state laws; and openness or readiness for dialogue.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

Thus, Nigeria as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural society with enormous potential for economic, social, and democratic development being bedeviled by intense conflicts and violence manifest within it can be obstructive to progress and peace.

Rather religious faithful, should seek to emphasize on interreligious dialogue as source of enlightenment and a constructive force for societal harmony. In our reflection on the applicability of the principles of nonviolence, it is imperative for us to reflect on and critically assess the common axiom that end does not justify the means. First we must restate the axiom in its correct ethical perspective. It should go like this: a good end does not justify the use of evil means because the good end is in the means. Thus, "The end does not justify the means" signifies more precisely, though still ambiguously that "evil may not be done that good might follow there from".¹⁷

Likewise, there is an urgent need for a form of dialogue ideally constructed to attest to deeply rooted social, political, economic, and cultural realities of specific societies. One of the primary aims of dialogue is the common search for a workable model of society and cooperation in building a human community which safeguards religious freedom and respects differences and particularities. Dialogue recognizes that plurality within the human family, including religious plurality, should not be allowed to be the source of conflict and crisis. Interreligious dialogue presents the most credible way to control the noxious tide of religious fanaticism and philistinism sweeping across all Nigeria.

Hence, nonviolent means can be utilized in such a way as to maintain a system of order with justice. Nonviolent means of conflict resolution can be used to end hostilities and their causes. Peacemaking aims to bring about fundamental systemic change toward social justice with nonviolent forms of action. Variations in this position range along a continuum from gradualist long-range change, using orderly established procedures with minimum of conflict with the system, to a kind of change which more sharply conflicts with the social system and uses extraordinary and extralegal forms of action to bring about change.

Indeed, Nonviolence techniques can be hoped to kill fanaticism and all kinds of fundamentalism at their very roots. A society convinced of the value of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in all its aspects will promote the values of fraternity, dignity, brotherhood and humanity. If such training is part of the society at the roots and is done with reference to behaviors in daily contexts, it will become a trend that will pervade the whole society and may prevail at all levels. Ghandhian principles of non-violence provide a solid foundation for crafting an effective strategy against terrorism because Non-violence is fundamentally a means of achieving justice and combating oppression.

Growing bodies of research and action models are available for consideration by reconcilers or third-party interveners who can help to bring about resolution of tension in the Nigerian context as Gandhi vividly demonstrated its effectiveness in resisting racial injustice in South Africa and winning independence for India¹⁸. The same principles - fighting injustice while avoiding harm - can be applied in the struggle against violent extremism in contemporary Nigeria society.

Adherents of various religions (as obtained within the Nigerian context) should endeavor through their practice of interreligious dialogue to make religion a source of enlightenment and a constructive force for peace-making and building social harmony between people, especially in situations of misguided religious extremism, fundamentalism, and sectarianism. In this way religion becomes part of the solution rather than the problem. Towards achieving this goal, religions ought to come together for the promotion of non-violence culture the common task of peace-making worthy of all religions.

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