Reflection on the relevance on Gandhi and nonviolence/peace building in the 21st century

1. Mohandas Gandhi was born on 2 October 1869 in the current state of Gujarat. His father died before he was able to finish schooling, and he was married at the age of thirteen to Kasturba. He then decided to head to England in 1888 to pursue a law degree. Gandhi met numerous people in London that encouraged him to pursue his own beliefs and way of thinking. He returned to India in late 1891 after completion of his law degree, but shortly after moved to South Africa to become a legal advisor to a businessman. Living in South Africa, where Indians were greatly discriminated against, opened Gandhi’s eyes to the force of European racism. He emerged as the leader of the Indian community and he coined the term *Satyagraha* to represent his belief in non-violent resistance.

2. Gandhi was a key figure in the early non-violence movement and his belief in seeking *satya* (truth) through *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *brahmacharya* (striving towards God). He aimed to make the oppressor and the oppressed recognise their common humanity. Upon his return to India in 1915, Gandhi travelled the country extensively and participated in a number of local struggles. His interventions grew his reputation and he became involved in politics, leading the opposition against repressive legislation. He deservedly earned the title of Mahatma, meaning Great Soul.

3. Following the atrocities in the Punjab, Gandhi initiated the non-cooperation movement, which encouraged Indians to become self-reliant, and to withdraw from British institutions. He began the civil disobedience movement with the breaking of the “salt laws.”

4. On April 6, 1930, after having marched 241 miles on foot from his village, Mohandas K. Gandhi arrived at the coastal village
of Dandi, and gathered salt. Millions of people all over India followed suit. It was a simple act, but one which was illegal under British colonial rule of India. More than 100,000 were sent to jail; many felt victim to police violence, but none retaliated or even defended themselves. Theirs was a choice of active non-violence, at the behest of Mohandas K. Gandhi.

5. Despite him, and thousands of others, being arrested, the British agreed to hold a conference to negotiate terms of Indian independence, which originally proved unsuccessful. India gained independence on the 15th of August, 1947, shortly after Gandhi was assassinated. He was, and remains to be one of the most influential leaders in the non-violence movement, and he pursued his beliefs until his untimely death.

"My religion teaches me that whenever there is distress which one cannot remove, one must fast and pray." Mahatma Gandhi

6. For Gandhi, ahimsa was the expression of the deepest love for all humans, including one’s opponents. Elements of Gandhi’s philosophy had their roots in the Indian religions of Jainism and Buddhism. He was also inspired by the teachings of Jesus, in particular the emphasis on love for everyone, even one’s enemies, and the need to strive for justice. Gandhi firmly believed that if violence was used to achieve any end – even if it was employed in the name of justice – the result would be more violence. In a world seemingly dominated by violence and hatred, Mohandas K. Gandhi reincarnated the ancient idea of Ahimsa, active non-violence, as the only way of living in peace.

7. Throughout time, Gandhi has influenced a number of global leaders who valued the importance of non-violence in their work. Martin Luther King Jr. drew from Gandhi’s writings during the civil rights movements in the United States; Nelson Mandela was inspired by Gandhi during his anti-apartheid movement in South Africa; and Aung San Suu Kyi drew inspiration from Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence in her work to democratise Burma (Myanmar). The undeniable
importance of Gandhi’s work remains incredibly vital in the 21st century as we continue to work for a non-violent and peaceful world.

8. Gandhi was able to inspire and organise people from all over India, from a number of different castes, which is a feat in and of itself. He brought together highly educated individuals living in big cities with rural farmers in order to participate in shared events that spoke volumes to the impact that non-violence can make. Even in today’s world of modern warfare, terrorism, and highly volatile conflicts, Gandhi’s non-violent approach to conflict remains valid. One cannot solve a conflict strictly through fighting; it is essential for warring parties to discuss the conflict at hand and reach a resolution, otherwise there would be no end to the fighting. This can be witnessed in the conflict in Northern Ireland – had the differing factions not discussed reconciliation and solutions to the conflict, there would likely still be frequent violent attacks occurring today.

9. Gandhi’s practices and beliefs can also be witnessed when studying aspects of the Arab Awakening, specifically within Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. The non-violent protests that began on 25 January 2011, and lasted for eighteen days, resulted in President Mubarak stepping down, which is a significant action that clearly demonstrates how peaceful, non-violent protests, even in today’s modernised society, can have a life-altering effect on many individuals. Gandhi was the father of the non-violence movement, and was an inspiration to those young and old in Egypt, whether purposely or incidentally. Those in Egypt can be compared to some individuals in Tunisia, such as the vegetable seller who lit himself on fire in protest of the government. The initial actions taken in Tunisia do not follow the principles of Gandhi directly, but they indirectly resist similar injustices: corruption, unemployment, food security, the lack of freedom of speech, and poor living conditions. The movement in Egypt also grew to involve essentially all sectors of society: impoverished and wealthy; educated and uneducated; doctors and students; mothers
and lawyers. Individuals in Egypt realised that changes could not be made without sacrifice, as Gandhi believed.

10. Some Syrians have similarly followed Gandhi’s principles. The revolution began in March 2011 with peaceful protests against the torture of students who had painted anti-government graffiti. They were subsequently punished by a heavy-handed government, and the violence continues today by both the government and the Free Syria Army. The actions by the rebel forces do not speak for the whole of the country, however. Over 60,000 Syrian civilians have been killed in the civil war, because violence has appeared to be a more viable answer for some.

11. Violence is evidently not getting the desired results: the government forces continue to fight the rebel army over towns and cities; President al-Assad remains in power; innocent people continue to die. It is essential that the world today still remember the important lessons that Gandhi taught the world: non-violence can work, in many cases! If the rebel army in Syria had remained non-violent while the government pursued violent encounters, it is possible that more international forces may have intervened to encourage al-Assad to step down and stop executing his people; non-violent actions by civilians versus violent actions by government may have encouraged international organisations, such as the UN, to get involved and condemn the Assad government for crimes against humanity.

12. Ultimately, non-violence has been, remains to be, and always will be, the answer to solving disagreements and conflicts, no matter what the case may be. Gandhi was a pioneer of the non-violence movement, and has gained international recognition and significance thanks to his incredible teachings and way of life. We should never forget that peace and non-violence are vital to conflict resolution, and without them, no conflict would ever be truly resolved.

13. The International Day of Non-Violence is marked on 2 October, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. He is recognised
by the United Nations as the leader of the Indian independence movement and pioneer of the philosophy and strategy of non-violence. According to General Assembly resolution A/RES/61/271 of 15 June 2007, which established the commemoration, the International Day is an occasion to "disseminate the message of non-violence, including through education and public awareness". The resolution reaffirms "the universal relevance of the principle of non-violence" and the desire "to secure a culture of peace, tolerance, understanding and non-violence".

In our world of today there is universal respect for Mahatma Gandhi and of the enduring relevance of his philosophy.

"Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man". Mahatma Gandhi

Some sources:


Fr. Paul Lansu

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