

Dr. Sarojini Henry
Leonard Theological College

SOCIAL ETHIC OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND MARTIN BUBER

In the first week of March 1939, Martin Buber wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi in reply to Gandhi's article, "The Jews," published in his prestigious weekly, *Harijan*, dated 26th November 1938. Gandhi had suggested that the Jews in Germany use Satyagraha or soul-force as the most effective weapon against Nazi persecution. Gandhi had further expressed his concern over the Jewish-Arab problem. He wrote, "But if they (Jews) must look to the Palestine of geography as their national home, it is wrong to enter it under the shadow of the British gun." Further, Gandhi proposed that the fulfilment of Zionist goals be wholly dependent on the good will of the Arabs.

Martin Buber, who came to Palestine in 1938, had indeed been working for Jewish-Arab rapprochement and peaceful existence along with friends of Ha'ol. In fact, Buber had even delayed leaving Germany in order to offer spiritual resistance to the Nazi regime, and now he was far from convinced by Gandhi's article which did not take full account of all the factors involved. Buber was much disturbed that this statement should come from a leader whom he had all along revered and admired. Buber composed his reply over several weeks, taking great care and deliberation in drafting it: "Day and night, I took myself to task, searching . . . whether I had not fallen into the grievous error of collective egoism." Along with a similar letter by Judah Magnus, then President of the Hebrew University, Buber's letter was sent to Gandhi's ashram at Seagon. There is no indication of Gandhi having ever received the letters. There was no reply from Gandhi.

Gandhi evidently had his own reasons for writing the controversial article in *Harijan*. His Jewish friends had requested him to declare publicly his views on their efforts to find a National Home in Palestine. While in South Africa, Gandhi acquired some close Jewish friends. Hermann Kallenbach, a German Jew, played a leading role in Gandhi's Satyagraha since its inception. He also helped Gandhi financially to

set up the Tolstoyan farm. Henry Polak, another Jew, edited *Indian Opinion* for Gandhi. Through Kallenbach, Gandhi hired a Jewish secretary, Sonja Schlesin, a woman of strong opinions and high ideals. She often competed with Gandhi in some of his moral experiments, a challenge which Gandhi greatly enjoyed. Besides these close friends, there were Morris Philipson, a Jewish member of the South African Parliament; Gabriel Isaacs, who lived with Gandhi at his Phoenix settlement; and Louis Ritch, who did much legal work for the Indian cause. Therefore, Gandhi's sympathy for the Jews expressed in his article can be taken to be genuine. He was also probably sincere in his belief that, because of the homogeneity of the Jewish people and their giftedness, there was more hope of a greater success than that achieved by the Indian Satyagraha in multi-tribal South Africa.

By the year 1939, Gandhi was perhaps the world's foremost advocate and exemplar of non-violent methods of political action. His political principle of Satyagraha and non-violence came to be widely recognized in the West. It is not impossible that some of the Jewish advocates of Arab-Jewish reconciliation viewed Gandhi's peaceful spiritual mode of political action as a model for achieving Arab-Jewish amity. Buber himself seems to have followed Gandhi's political actions closely. In his article, "Gandhi, Politics and Us," published in 1930, he describes Gandhi's heroic attempts to introduce the religious spirit into politics. Gandhi, according to Buber, brought religion and ethics into politics in a way that was both impressive and problematic.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the reformation of nationalism almost everywhere; with this spirit of nationalism came the attachment of people to the land they owned and possessed. It looked as though the age of empires was coming to an end. Of the many empires that the world has seen, the British Empire was the most memorable, and perhaps the most majestic, and India was, for a period of two centuries, part of the crown—indeed its jewel. Although the struggle for independence was to be long and hazardous, India eventually attained independence in 1947. Concern for Palestine and the Jews was, however, never lacking in British imperial thinking. Although the Balfour Declaration may be construed as part of British strategic calculation for extended control over West Asia, at least it gave hopes of a secure home for Jews in Palestine. What had seemed an impossible dream of the nineteenth century Zionists now became a reality. In 1948 a year after India's independence, Israel became a nation.

Buber always remained firm in his support of the Jewish settlement in Palestine. "We could not and cannot renounce the Jewish claim," he wrote to Gandhi. At the same time, Buber was sure that the Jewish claim did not negate the rights and privileges of the Arab people. Thus it was prophetic politics that Buber offered to his people – a politics that sought to provide a solution to the political and social problems based on dialogue and mutual accommodation. The Indian national struggle for independence was a phenomenon unprecedented in history. No less unprecedented was Gandhi's application of his principle of Satyagraha in politics. Starting alone and helped by the many Indian Congress members along the way, Gandhi faced the might of the British Raj and made it retreat, and in his life time.

What can we say about these two men who in their own way contributed to the nationalistic fervour of their countries? This paper attempts to delineate the political and social thought of Martin Buber, the Prophet, and Mohandas Gandhi, the Mahatma.

Some Biographical Fragments

Martin Buber and Mahatma Gandhi were contemporaries, but Buber was younger than Gandhi by nine years. Some world events, such as the First World War had an impact on both. In Europe, at the beginning of this century, anti-semitism gave rise to the great utopian vision of the Jewish state. The Jews had to be rescued from their alien status in the world and be restored to normalcy. In their struggle against colonialism and imperialism, the people of India were trying to regain their sense of dignity and political independence. It is in these historical circumstances that we have to appreciate the lives of Buber and Gandhi. Again, their religion was existential rather than theological. Hence these two men have to be studied biographically, for it is impossible to understand their ethics apart from their lives and careers.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in a theistic Vaishnavite family on October 2, 1869. He married at thirteen. His wife, Kasturibai, although illiterate, was to become a source of immense strength for Gandhi in his stormy political career. At nineteen, Gandhi decided to go abroad (cross the black waters) to England to study law. The three years of stay in England was a liberating experience for Gandhi. Gandhi went to England looking for the knowledge that made England so powerful and strong. He returned to India convinced that it had ample spiritual resources in its ancient scriptures.

In 1891, an Indian firm requested Gandhi, now back in India, to be its legal interpreter in South Africa. Gandhi took the opportunity and sailed to South Africa as a young man of twenty-four. Little did he realize then that in South Africa he was going to find his identity. He stayed there twenty-one years, fighting for the cause of the Indians who were settled there and protesting the injustice which the government was meting out to them. In South Africa, away from the Hindu caste regulations, and restrictions, Gandhi was able to develop his own religious and ethical ideas. His reading of many Indian and Western writings, and his friendship with people of all cultures, enlarged his vision. Above all, for Gandhi, South Africa became the training ground for the political activity that was to occupy him for the rest of his life. It was here that he developed his philosophy of Satyagraha. His experiments in community living also had its beginning there.

From 1920-1947, Gandhi dominated Indian politics - either directly or indirectly - in an impressive way. When India did attain independence, Gandhi did not participate in the celebrations. He was involved in the effort to resolve the communal riots between the Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu-Muslim unity was one issue that evaded Gandhi all his life. Nathuram Godse, an orthodox Hindu, who saw Hinduism menaced by its contact with Islam, shot Gandhi with three bullets as Gandhi was going to his usual prayer meeting on the evening of January 30, 1948.

Mordecai Martin Buber, nine years younger than Gandhi, was born in Vienna on February 8, 1878. When he was three years old, his mother left him, and Martin spent his childhood in the house of his grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Buber, a noted Midrashic scholar. In this house Martin acquired a love of languages. His loneliness probably led him into the world of books. At age fifteen he wrestled with Kant's *Prolegomena*, with the statement that time and space have no existence in themselves; they are mere forms of our sensory perception. In contrast to Kant, Nietzsche, the enemy of convention, offered a dynamism which fascinated the seventeen year-old Buber. During his subsequent university studies in Germany and Switzerland, his field of study included languages, art, politics, education, and theology.

While studying at Zurich in 1899, Martin met and married a Christian girl from Munich, Paula Winkler. Paula, an accomplished writer herself, shouldered many of the tasks of family life and encouraged Buber

to dedicate himself to literary work. Buber was later to write a number of articles and books in various fields of religion, philosophy, politics, art, psychology, and education. In the 1920's Buber and Franz Rosenzweig undertook the translation of the entire Old Testament from Hebrew into German, a task which Buber completed in the last years of his life.

Buber became acquainted with Hasidism during his childhood when his father took him to visit a Hasidic community in Galicia. Hasidism with its mystical nature and its message, that God can be seen in everything and reached by every pure deed, attracted him. For some-time he retired from his other activities and devoted himself to the study of Hasidism. He acquired international fame by collecting and re-telling Hasidic legends. His philosophy of dialogue, as developed in his book, *I and Thou*, reflects much of Buber's experience of Hasidism.

Although Buber had been associated with Zionism since its inception, his was always a dissenting voice. Disillusioned with the political Zionism of some of its leaders, Buber chose to advocate spiritual and cultural Zionism in the Zionist weekly, *Die Welt*, that he edited since 1908. He was emphatic that Judaism did not mean merely being a nation; it has to become a community of faith and an advocate of the concept of the kingdom of God. Also Buber tried to reaffirm in the German Jews the Biblical ideals of humanity and justice and to remind them of the Jews' historical responsibility to the world.

Buber emigrated to Palestine in 1938. Here his academic activity flourished and he also began to write in Hebrew. From 1938, he was professor of social Philosophy at the Hebrew University and in 1949, he founded the Institute of Adult Education. After his retirement, he travelled widely giving lectures. He was awarded many prizes and honours. He died in 1965 at the age of eighty-eight in Jerusalem.

The Philosophy of Dialogue and Satyagraha

The philosophy of dialogue is Martin Buber's masterpiece. According to Buber, the fundamental fact of human existence is the relation of one human being to another. Mutual relation is the essence of human existence and the source of real humanity. Buber's book, *I and Thou*, contains the basic formulation of the philosophy of dialogue. Buber distinguishes two basic forms of relation between the human person and the world, the

I-It and the I-Thou relation. The I-Thou relation is characterized by mutual-ity, openness and spontaneity. It is a true dialogue in which both partners speak to one another as equals. On the other hand, in the I-It relation that I observes, calculates and uses the It for his or her own advantage. According to Buber, if we live in this world of impersonal relations, we fail to reach our human potentiality.

God, says Buber, is the eternal Thou of the human person. God is present whenever one meets one's fellow human beings or the world as Thou. We cannot say Thou to God unless we say Thou to one another. Eternal Thou is not a symbol for God but of our relation with God. Thus God is the Absolute person who becomes a person, so to speak, in order to love and be loved, to know and be known by the human person. This is the paradox of the Biblical God who remains imageless and yet enters into direct relation with us. Thus, the manner in which we relate to nature, fellow human beings and God determines the quality of our lives. This, for Buber, is the message of the life of dialogue. Dialogue is not only awareness of the other but is something that demands responsibility to the other person. Responsibility means responding to the other person and answering the other person from the depths of one's being. Dialogue is thus based upon a coequal subject-object relation where the partners impress upon each other without over-powering the other.

Satyagraha is a combination of the Sanskrit term *Satya* meaning truth and *agraha* denoting insistence or adherence. Thus Satyagraha literally means a firm belief in truth, and thus Gandhi called it a truth-force or soul-force. In the course of time Gandhi made Satyagraha into a whole philosophy of life and into an ideology of action to be used effectively as a means of struggle for humanitarian goals and for basic change. As a way of life, Satyagraha meant the total acceptance of its ideal of truth and a ceaseless endeavor to live up to the ideal. As a creative protest for a just cause, Satyagraha came to include boycotts, civil disobedience and non-cooperation.

Gandhi was insistent that non-violence is the only means to Satyagraha. Gandhi stood firmly in the Hindu tradition for his exposition of non-violence. However, the concept was also reinforced by Gandhi from Christian and Western sources such as Jesus, Tolstoy and Thoreau. In Hinduism, however, non-violence, is not given a political stature. Through Gandhi's effective use of non-violence, the word has successfully entered the vocabulary of politics.

Thus for Gandhi, Satyagraha discarded all forms of violence. Violence is often described as that which turns anybody, who is subjected to it, into a thing. As opposed to this, Gandhi's non-violence was often a dialogue. Before launching on any civil disobedience, Gandhi always gave advance public notice of his course of action. He believed that reliance on secrecy leads to cowardice and fear and that it inflates real differences to the point where they appear impassable. His application of Satyagraha indeed transformed the political situation of a conflict between two nations into a dialogue. For all the outward struggles during the Indian Independence Movement, the result was a harmonious transformation of relationship between England and India. Inasmuch as non-violence is a dialogue, Satyagraha encompasses the underlying thrust of Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

Gandhi's Satyagraha centered upon the necessity of reconciling ends and means. He often said that means and ends are related in the same way as a seed is related to the tree. The means become ends-in-the-making or ends-in-process. Buber's concept of responsibility of an I-to-Thou would also imply that the other person is not to be used as a means but as an end. In Buber's pronouncement concerning the moral equivalence of means and ends, we can hear Gandhi's proclamation of convertibility of means and ends.

Political Thought - Buber and Gandhi

Buber and Gandhi were both political radicals who viewed politics that used power to expand power unfavorably. If politics was the essential dimension of the life of dialogue for Buber, for Gandhi politics was a quest for truth. Like Gandhi Buber also did not differentiate the sacred from the secular as all creation is sacred. They were both insistent that one should take part in politics and both were against any intellectual withdrawal from politics. Buber wrote, "We can only work for the Kingdom of God through working on all the spheres allotted us."¹

In his article, "Gandhi, Politics and Us," Buber had expressed his fascination for Gandhi's approach of introducing moral and religious principles into politics. This fusion of religion and politics, Buber believed, would enlighten the West over-burdened by the polarization of

1. Buber, "Gandhi, Politics and Us" (1930) in Buber, *Pointing the way*, p. 137.

the sacred and the secular. Yet Buber had his own misgivings. Is it possible to use religion as a means to the political? "Does religion allow itself to be introduced into politics in such a way that political success can be obtained"² Buber was afraid that Gandhi might be misunderstood for recommending religion for the sake of political ends.

Gandhi, on the other hand, firmly believed that he could not live a religious life unless he participated in politics. Politics, for Gandhi, created the very conditions required for a religious life. He said, "My national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from the bondage of flesh. . . My patriotism is for me a stage in my journey to the eternal land of freedom and peace."³

For Buber, however, politics and religion should not be identified or synthesized. Politics and religion exist in different spheres. The unconditionality of spirit cannot be reconciled to the conditionality of a situation. Buber's critique of Gandhi was that Gandhi allied his religion with the politics of others. Further, Gandhi's alliance of religion and politics is complicated by the fact that through religion, Gandhi expected political success. Buber contended that success and failure are the criteria of politics, but that they cannot be applied to religion. Also, "God's love is not measured by success."

Buber often warned against succumbing to the dangers of a moral absolutism. He wrote, "We cannot prepare the messianic world, we can only prepare for it."⁴ For this reason Buber rejected the non-violence of Gandhi. He wrote to Gandhi, "We have not proclaimed as you do, and as did Jesus, the son of our people, the teaching of non-violence."⁵ Buber could not see how the principle of non-violence used by Indians in South Africa could be just transferred to the situation of Jews in Germany. For Buber, each situation is unique. Ethical principles, to be effective, should respond to the uniqueness of each situation. One should, therefore, with full awareness of the responsibility involved, determine the limits of the ethical imperative in each situation.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

3. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, XXIII, p. 349.

4. Buber, *Pointing the Way*, p. 137.

5. Buber, "A Letter to Gandhi," in Buber, *Pointing the Way*, p. 145.

Gandhi's Satyagraha was closely related to the concept of *anasakti-yoga*, or the doing of an action without any desire for the result of the action. This is the central message of the *Bhagavadgita* – the performance of one's duty without any attachment to its fruit. According to *anasakti-yoga*, one has to act with emotional detachment to the consequences. Such an attitude, the *Gita* declares, would result in a stabilized mentality and a certain amount of equipoise in the midst of activity.

Social Philosophy – Buber and Gandhi

For Gandhi, Satyagraha was also the answer to social and economic problems in India. He was confident that a society dedicated to non-violence and truth would eventually become a model society. He defined his goal as *sarvodaya*, the welfare of all. Gandhi recommended a social and economic system oriented towards people. He was opposed to the kind of economic and social development that ignores creative activity, dehumanizes or degrades the lives of people and imperils their spiritual well being. He believed that a true social life was based on moral values.

Gandhi's choice was not between capitalism and socialism but between a centralized political and economic system and a decentralized one. For Gandhi political decentralization was to be brought about by a federation of autonomous village republics. Believing that large scale industries would lead to exploitation of villages by towns and cities, Gandhi rejected the Western model of centralized industries, mass production and urbanization.

In order to realize some of the principles implicit in Satyagraha, Gandhi set up the Phoenix settlement and the Tolstoyan farm in South Africa and ashrams in India. In these settlements the members lived in a community, owning nothing as individuals. Gandhi hoped that through vegetarianism, prayer and service, the members of the community would become adherents of *Satya*. Thus Gandhi believed in reforming society not through the coercive power of the state but through voluntary self reform of the individual.

Buber's social philosophy also rejected the extremes of individualism and collectivism. Buber recommended a commune as an alternative based on mutuality and spontaneity. His vision of Zionism was socialist, he envisaged the creation of Israel of communities which would be bound

by a principle of direct personal relationship. He saw the Hasidic circle as best illustrating community in religious fellowship. The kibbutz, Buber claimed, is a comprehensive attempt to create a new society along the socialist lines, combining production and consumption, industry and agriculture in a cooperative community around a commonly held land. Having come into existence out of a particular circumstance and need, the kibbutz has been flexible, hence it is not a failure but perhaps a signal to paths in utopia.

Thus Buber emphasized that a community should be based on the reality of mutual relations between the members. Just as an individual becomes a person insofar as he or she steps into living relation with other individuals, so a social group becomes a community only if the members are capable of truly saying Thou to one another. Buber was also insistent that in a community there should be a common relationship to a center, a central Thou which addresses the members collectively. This center can be just a charismatic leader or a transcendent Thou, which commands response from all. Buber hoped that the center would ensure the continuity of the I-Thou relation among the members and also ensure an immediacy in the relation between the members of the community. Thus Buber's social philosophy is not centered on an economic movement with ownership of land or even on the establishment of a perfectly just society but is centered on social renewal, based on a fundamental transformation of interpersonal fellowship.

From Ideals to Reality

Central to the political thought of Mahatma Gandhi is the concept of truth. It is not without significance that he subtitles his autobiography "the story of my experiments with truth." For Gandhi, truth is the essence of reality, since nothing except truth exists. As the basis of all things and as the substance of morality, truth is the only justification for our existence. Gandhi was also aware that truth is beyond the human empirical grasp. Therefore, he distinguished between absolute truth and relative truth. All that is available to the human person is relative truth. Absolute truth serves as a challenge, as a goal and a motive for every human being who pursues relative truth.

The fact that the human being is not capable of knowing the absolute truth made Gandhi assert that Satyagraha excludes the use of violence. Thus, non-violence is to be the only means to truth. This

non-violence, Gandhi emphasized, should be born out of courage not out of despair or of cowardice. It is often held that, because of the application of non-violence in Satyagraha, Gandhi's concept of truth escapes some of the practical difficulties of ethical relativism.

Buber was wary of eternal principles applicable for all times and for all circumstances. He emphasized the risk involved in social, economic and political issues where there is often no guarantee of the truth of one's position. In contrast to the advocates of absolutism, Buber described his answer as the narrow ridge "between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge, but the certainty of meeting what remains unclosed."⁶ On this narrow ridge, one refuses to give validity to any human expression of the absolute, while affirming the existence of the absolute itself as the ultimate ground of being.

How does Gandhi's theory of relative truth compare with Buber's option for the narrow ridge? A good example is the ambiguity that confronts one in everyday existence as one wrestles with the issues of violence and non-violence—the test case that Buber contends with Gandhi in his letter to the latter. Buber rejects Gandhi's counsel of pacifism saying he cannot support a position that permits good to be undone by evil.

Gandhi was indeed aware that one cannot live one's life without ever resorting to violence. Often violence in one form or another is inevitable or unavoidable. Further, there are situations of moral dilemma when it would be wrong not to act violently. When we act violently, it does not necessarily mean that the ideal of non-violence has been abandoned. The non-violence ideal is still absolute in the sense that it informs the spirit in which violence is done. What Gandhi would do is to keep on holding to the relative truth, all the while remembering that life is still informed by the spirit of the unrealizable ideal.

Buber would argue that the choice of violence or non-violence is determined by each particular life situation. Thus, for Buber, the answer would be that there is no universally valid answer, "for here there is no once-for-all; in each situation that demands decision the demarcation line between service and service must be drawn anew." Buber adds,

6. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 184.

"Quantum satis' means in the language of lived truth not either-or, but as-much-as-one-can"⁷ Thus at every instant the demarcation line has to be pushed as far as possible towards righteousness and peace.

It looks as though neither Buber nor Gandhi has given any clear-cut answers or even fairly good limits within which we can locate our responses in any critical situation. The realm between morality and politics remains still unfathomed. The philosophy of dialogue or even the concept of non-violence looks very fragile in the light of the hard realities of political and social life. We still have to struggle between conflicting and irreconcilable opposites. Yet this does not mean that their lives and their efforts have been meaningless. Buber and Gandhi have shown us their mode of approach – either to hold on to relative truth or to walk on the narrow ridge. With their ideals, however, they have both touched on eternity.

7. Buber, "The Validity and Limitation of the Political Principle," in Buber, *Pointing the Way*, p. 217.