

*The Power of Nonviolence in Procuring Lasting Sociopolitical and Economic Change: A Christian Ethical Perspective*

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**Abstract**

Violence has become a dominating worldwide phenomenon of profound concern today. Violence has always found a breeding ground where there is social injustice, inequality, oppression and exploitation. The place of violent actions in situations of inevitable structural change has been an issue for long and protracted debate among scholars. Opinions on the critical question concerning the morality of violent actions to bring about the needed change in unjust sociopolitical and economic systems and the potency of violence in actualizing such change have been varied and conflicting. Philosophers like Karl Marx, Lenin, Frantz Fanon and some liberation theologians have seen violence as a necessary tool in bringing about the needed change in the society. However, others like Martin Luther King Jnr, Mahatma Gandhi and many other advocates of peace have advocated for the effective transformation and liberation of the society without violence. Although the subject of violence and nonviolence can be approached from different viewpoints, this paper discusses it from an ethical perspective and seeks to answer the question specifically from the viewpoint of Christian ethics. The paper argues in favour of non violence, insisting that meaningful changes can take place even within the most callous structures of today by applying the Christian ethics of nonviolence. It concludes, among other things, that the Nonviolent approach to social revolution rather than violent methods stands as the more moral and effective means of reaching more moral and lasting ends due to its compatibility with the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ.

**Keywords:** Nonviolence, violence; ethics; Christian ethics.

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## Introduction

Owing to the ubiquity and dominance of violence in global sociopolitical, economic and religious affairs, it has been noted that one of the legacies the twentieth century left for us is that of great cruelty and violence (Nagler 2014: 1). Every community today experiences, in one form or the other, the reality of some or all of such conditions that often generate violence like social injustice, oppression, exploitation, social inequality and lack of freedom.. Consequently, there seems to be a world-wide realization of the inevitability and utility (or profitability) of constructive change in the society. As a result of these social conditions and the attendant realization, the dominated and oppressed people today, whether nations or classes within a nation, are forced to agitate for a revolutionary change in their subjugated or dominated position, which they see as being contrary to basic human rights.

This revolutionary trend appears to characterize all levels of relationship in contemporary times. This can be seen in family life; industrial relations; class conflicts; gender, racial and ethnic conflicts; the world-wide struggle between the rich and poor; and so forth. The demand for change is so much tied-up with the idea of violence today that whenever we hear of ‘revolution’ and ‘revolutionary movements’ (such as liberation theology, students’ union, labour union, women liberation movement, Islamic State, Boko Haram, and so forth), we quickly understand them as referring more or less to violent actions. The tendency to solve the social problems of oppression and other forms of social injustice by violent means has therefore become more and more wide-spread in our generation. As such, our present world and its institutions seem to be built on a worldview that takes violence as an essential norm (Nagler 2014: 3).

That the sociopolitical and economic systems of most, if not all, societies today are unjust and, therefore, need some level of change, is incontrovertible. The critical questions that demand critical consideration, however, concern: (1) whether or not we should embark upon violent actions in order to bring about the needed change in unjust sociopolitical and economic systems; and (2) which of the two options of violence and nonviolence possesses the potency of actualizing the needed sociopolitical and economic changes in our society.

The issue of the place of violent actions in situations of inevitable structural change has been an issue for long and protracted debate. Responses have been varied and conflicting as a wide range of opinions exists concerning the potency of violence in actualizing the needed political, social and economic change in our society without harming, damaging or destroying our humanity. Secular opinions like Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and others advocate the doctrine of revolutionary violence with the conviction that “violence generates liberation” (Windas, 1971: 41). Fanon, for example, is quoted by Windas (1971:41) to have argued in support of this position that “It is through violence that man comes to stand on his own fact, to realize his own dignity, and it is through a shared act of violence with his fellow men that he realizes a new kind of human community”. Also in his famous book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1979: 28-29) maintains that “You do not turn any society, however primitive it may be, upside-down... if you are not decided from the very beginning ... to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing. This, according to him, will entail being “ready for violence at all time”.

It is significant to consider that, apart from these secular opinions, many of the revolutionary movements within Christianity itself uphold violence as the authentic, indispensable and inevitable means of bringing justice to a situation of structural injustice. A good example of this is Liberation Theology. Some versions of it uphold the use of violence, as the last resort, to counter organized and government approved violence against the masses.

Although the subject of violence can be approached from different viewpoints, this paper discusses it as an ethical problem and approaches it from the perspective of Christian ethics. Ethics, simply conceived, deals with what is right or wrong in human behavior or with how one should behave in a given situation. Christian ethics, particularly, is concerned with the rightness or wrongness of human actions or behaviour on the basis of the moral teachings of Christ (or Bible). Our concern in this paper, therefore, is with what ought to be the Christian position on the issue of violence versus nonviolence in situations of inevitable structural change. In other words, should a Christian embark on violent actions in a situation where change is needed?

### **Violence and its implications**

A discussion of a complex and ambiguous subject of this nature would require some clarifications of the term 'violence' and the variety of issues connected with it. This will enable us to fully realize its dangers. Many advocates of violence will never dare to be involved in violence when the word is properly understood. Moreover, many others that condemn violence will discover that they are perpetrators of the very violence they deny and denounce. West (1969: 8) has rightly observed, along this line, that: "We live in a world where the greatest violence may be done by those who most condemn the word, and contrariwise, where the rhetoric of violence may cover the softest hearts and the most ineffectual actions".

### **What is Violence?**

For our use in this paper, the different definitions of violence use the term in a derogatory sense as something evil and they make emphasis on the difference between force and violence. Alistair Kee, for example, defines violence as "excessive, unrestrained or unjustifiable force" (Kee, 1974: 134). He maintains that although there could be no violence without power or force, the difference lies in the fact that while power and force are neutral things that can be used for good or evil, violence can never be neutral, but is by definition an evil thing. Adam Curle goes further to define violence as "action which damages or jeopardizes the possibility of human growth, development or fulfillment, whether physical, psychic, moral or cultural" (Curle 1975: 229). According to him, the word etymologically implies violation, rape, the unlawful use of force.

In agreement with Curle's definition is the definition of violence in the editorial to the same issues of *The Month* as "The violation of the human person" which, apart from physical torture, includes economic oppression (Editorial 1975: 227). This meaning is also re-echoed in Nagler's definition of violence as "harm to another's person or basic dignity" which includes "structural violence" (Nagler 2014: 3).

While Hellwig sees violence in line with Kee as “the force that operates outside the accepted patterns of normalcy” (qtd in West, 1969: 65), West (1969: 14) defines it as “harm done to another outside the rules of conflict which such a society sets up”. In the view of the revolutionary, however, “whatever delays the liberation... whether or not it has been institutionalized by society” is also violence (West 1969: 65).

### **Dimensions of Violence**

From these complementary definitions, we can identify, along with Curle (1975: 229) three dimensions of violence:

- (i) **Pathological Violence:** This refers to all kinds of senseless killings and unlawful private brutalities like armed robbers do in order to rob people. That every one condemns such act of violence is self-evident.
- (ii) **Institutionalized Violence:** This is also known as structural violence.

This form of violence refers to violence perpetuated by or with the assent or backing of the state. This type of violence occurs when the State uses its force and power in oppressing, exploiting and repressing the weak masses rather than using them for self-defence, punishment of wrong doers and protection of the law-abiding. This type of violence is obviously condemned by all lovers of humanity. Examples of institutionalized violence include the brutal and repressive measures of former apartheid South Africa against the South African blacks and the communist governments’ hostilities against religion in former Soviet Union and other places.

(iii) **Ideological Violence:** This may also be referred to as revolutionary violence. Defenders of this type of violence refer to it as counter violence which is necessary to counter the institutionalized violence of the status quo in order to bring a change. This form of violence will include violent actions like bloody protests or rampages, coup d’état, guerilla warfare and others. The Russian, French and Cuban Revolutions are example of this form of violence.

### **3. Implications of Violence**

The social and moral problems posed by the increasing phenomenon of violence in our world today can be more easily realized when we consider some more recent and strange aspects of it as reported often in the news media. For instance, such unpleasant phenomena as hijacking of airplanes, kidnapping, rapes, terrorism, armed robbery, assassinations, exploitation and repression are unimaginable aspects of violence prevalent in contemporary times, which we all would generally condemn, regardless of our differing positions or schools of thought.

Considering, as West (1969: 8) points out, the fact that the innocent and uninvolved are usually victims of such ugly experiences, and that any of us may be the next victim of these happenings, we usually develop an understandable feeling of indignation, revulsion and a desire for effective counter-measures. However, because many people often allow human feelings to control and impair their human reasoning, their understanding and sense of judgment are often dulled as to the real issue at stake in adopting violent options as effective counter-measures.

While it is quite easy for such people to see and accept that pathological and institutionalized violence are unethical and condemnable, very many of them seem to see nothing wrong with the revolutionary violence of the oppressed because of their claim to its functional necessity for social transformation. By pointing out the impossibility of change in the world by a natural course, defenders of revolutionary violence maintain that the inescapable imperative for revolutionary change necessitates violence. Fanon (1967: 48) argues in this regards, that “Colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat... colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence”. Along with Fanon, defenders and exponents of this position argue that: “...armed revolt is the only means which appears appropriate in areas of such unredeemed servitude. The oppressors’ control is too absolute for other solutions to succeed... (Editorial 1975: 227).

As a result of this line of thought, the option of violence in social transformation seems to gain wider support today than the practice of nonviolence. The reason is usually the failure to realize that the adoption of revolutionary violence as a counter transformative measure often tend to actually increase the quantity of violence in society rather than reduce or effectively eliminate it. Ethically, however, actions are judged to be morally right or wrong on the basis of how much they enhance man’s ultimate happiness, self-fulfillment and general wellbeing. The corollary of this is that actions which are debilitating to man’s progress, happiness, self-fulfillment and general wellbeing are judged to be morally wrong (Omogbe1993: ix). In keeping with this, we need to examine the ethics of violence from the Christian point of view on the basis of how it affects human life.

### **Christian Refutation of Violence**

In spite of the plausibility of Fanon’s arguments, counter arguments from practical, moral and Christian considerations tend to invalidate them. Whatever the cause may be, violence viewed from a moral perspective, especially from a Christian moral point of view, is never justifiable. While the theological and moral claims to the need for Christian participation in social transformation cannot be refuted, the use of violent methods is to be vehemently rejected because of its discrepancy with Christian moral teachings and its destructive and debilitating social implications. From a Christian perspective, we can establish the moral wrongness of violence from a good number of premises.

Theologically, violence is incompatible with Christian values, principles and practices. Firstly, it is incompatible with the Christian values of love, faith, patience, forgiveness, gentleness, long suffering, and temperance, which form part of the fruit of the Spirit. Violence contradicts the basic Christian concept of love for the enemy and non-retaliation of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38-46). To advocate violence inevitably is to advocate hatred. Moreover, violence promotes fear and eliminates faith in God. It exhibits the fear and anxiety either in the oppressed of being crushed by evil structures of injustice or in the oppressors of being overthrown by the agitated masses of the oppressed.

Reubem Alves, quoting Kee (1974: 138), clearly points out that “the fear of the future gives birth to violence”, for while the violence of the oppressed arises out of fear of being crushed by the oppressors, “those who so possess the present as to fear change use their power to make sure that no tomorrow comes to threaten today”. The use of violence also shows that we lack confidence in God to direct the social order towards bringing the cohesion, conservation, restoration, reconciliation or transformation needed in society at any given time.

Secondly, violence is practically opposed, not only to the teaching of Jesus Christ, but also to the life of Jesus Christ. Since Jesus Christ is our perfect example and standard of morality as Christians, then any lifestyle or doctrine which is in contradiction to His is non-Christian. This is not to say, however, that Jesus Christ was a pacifist, but to emphasize that Christ’s attitude to the social and political conditions of His time was different from the attitude and approach of the contemporary activist – the Zealots. Christ’s repudiation of the violent model both challenges and condemns any Christian who wishes to take up arms in the name of the Gospel, no matter what provocation.

It is pertinent at this point to clarify that the claim that Jesus was a “revolutionary” can be accepted only in the true sense of the term since He stood for standards and values antithetic to those conventionally accepted in the society of His day. Jesus was, however, not a ‘revolutionist’ in that while He criticized the unjust power structure of His contemporary times, He did not take arms or join with the ‘guerilla groups’ of the Zealots. His caution of Peter against his violent action of cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant at Gethsemane is a very illustrative and validating proof. “Put up again thy sword into its place; for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Therefore, while it is the duty of every Christian to work to eliminate unjust and oppressive conditions, it must be acknowledged, as Ernesto Cardinal is quoted in Editorial (1975: 228) to have said, that “in doing so holiness [should] flourish in them”.

Sociologically, violence is dysfunctional and disruptive. Violence brings a situation of social chaos which impedes progress, peace and the common good and happiness of members of the society. Although advocates of violence justify their action by pointing to the common good of the masses as their cause, it is incontrovertible that those masses are always the looser in and victims of violence. Moreover, we discover in recent times that delinquency and hooliganism often result from violent demonstrations, and in most cases, the target of such demonstrations – the ruling class - never share in such misfortunes that result. Also the change desired often never comes as the protests are often easily suppressed by superior repressive war implements. Thus we discover that the interest of the poor and oppressed masses which violent revolutionists claim to protect always turns out to be jeopardized during any such violent action. Verkuyl and Nordholt (1974: 34) insist that: “Chaos is the worst enemy the poor and oppressed could wish for [and] violent revolutions have seldom brought about a genuinely better condition for the poor people, and in fact are for the most part a demonic impulse”. It is not surprising, therefore, that the ideology of violence rather offends than appeals to people after an unpleasant experience of a bloody revolution and its attendant problems of impoverishment and desolation.

Logically, the social implications of violence reveal the self-contradictory and self-defeating content of the arguments of the defenders of violent revolution. Both the violence of the leftists and that of the rightists are usually justified on the basis of each being a means of eliminating the violence of the other. But in the actual sense they only increase the quantity of violence. Helder Camara, as quoted by Windas (1971: 42), has drawn our attention to what he describes as the ‘Spiral of Violence’. The first violence, according to him, is the deprivation suffered by the masses who are robbed of their property and rights by a privileged elite. This produces the second violence, which is the violence of rebellion; and this in turn generates the third violence – the violence of repression. The point is that violence breeds and begets violence. Therefore, if violence is bad and needs to be eliminated, then it is wrong to use violence to eliminate violence because such a solution will only increase the quantity of violence in the society. In justification of this argument, it is commonly said that ‘two wrongs cannot make a right’. Hannah Arendt (1974) carries this position further in her observation that:

Most violent revolutions have been morally indefensible. Bloody revolutions are usually mad adventures that lead to anarchy and sadistic aggressiveness. They exchange one group of scoundrels for another group of scoundrels. Instead of introducing a new era of justice, they give birth to anarchy ... men can be so intoxicated by the passion of revolution that they destroy what chances there are of real social achievements” (34) .

Psychologically, violence is inconsistent with and violates our human nature and authentic personality. Nagler (2014: 2) cites Dr. Vanana Shiva, a renowned leader of rural resistance in India, to have said in a recent lecture that we run the risk of compromising our humanity by adopting the option of violence. He further demonstrates this with reference to the astonishing high rate of depression and suicide among American service men and women today. One of them is quoted to have told a documentary filmmaker: “I no longer like who I am. I lost my soul in Iraq”. Another told a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team on a peacemaking trip to the Middle East: “I am still haunted by the things we did... I would give anything to be able to go back and undo some of the things we did. But I can’t. But at least I can thank you with all my heart for doing what you do” (Nagler 2014: 2). Such confessions testify to the original quality of our humanity and the great cost of violating or compromising it through violence.

From these and other possible considerations we can establish that violence is morally bad and should be shunned and condemned by every well-meaning Christian. It is important, however, to emphasize that, contrary to the common impression our position may seem to give, the condemnation of violence does not necessarily tantamount to supporting non-commitment to the cause of justice. Non-commitment itself would amount to encouraging institutional violence of oppression, exploitation and domination which is the primary violence that ignites the other forms. Our concern in this section is to establish, first of all, that violence is not morally right as a means of social transformation. But having addressed the issue of whether violent revolution is a morally acceptable model for social transformation or not, we now shift our focus to that of examining how unjust and oppressive structures can be transformed without bloody revolutions.

## **Nonviolence: The Christian Option**

In consonance with the Christian moral perspective and the realization of the necessity for change in most societies today, there are four primary bases for recommending the option of nonviolence. These are: (i) its compatibility with Christian moral teachings; (ii) its effectuality in achieving concrete social transformations; (iii) its practicability in the most difficult situations of our time; and (iv) its proximity to and consistency with our humanity.

The first basis for our recommendation of non - violence is its compatibility with Christian moral teachings. Nonviolence is compatible with Christian morality. Nonviolent commitment to the cause of justice is the only prospect for change from a Christian ethical perspective. Nonviolent revolution can follow the patterns of education and conscientization of both the oppressor and the oppressed; the revitalization of democracy; negotiations and dialogues; opposition by word and action, for example, through press releases and other forms of artistic demonstrations to critique or to caricature an evil system or regime; and so forth. The prophetic indictments of and remonstrations of Jeremiah and Amos against their contemporary political, economic and religious policies of the Kings of Judah and Samaria, respectively, and the apostolic warnings against existing social orders, like that of James (James 5:1-6) are biblical examples of Nonviolent means of transforming society. In the course of church history also many have demonstrated the authentic spirit of Christ by upholding this course of nonviolence. An example is Francis of Assisi, who followed the path of nonviolence rather than the violent methods of Innocent III during the Crusades. Those who follow the path of nonviolence reflect the Christian spirit more than other Christian groups that embark on violence.

The second basis for recommending the path of nonviolence is its effectuality in achieving concrete social reforms or transformations. The major criticism against the nonviolence alternative by defenders of violence and their major reason for rejecting it is the claim or fear that injustice is so institutionalized and structuralized that no soft approach can break it down. Both history and present day experience around us tend to disprove this claim or fear. In modern times, there are Christian and non-Christian personages who have effectively and successfully championed and still champion the course of nonviolence.

Among such figures are Mahatma Gandhi of India, Martin Luther King Jr. of the United States of America, Dom Helder Camara of Brazil, Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela of South Africa. These men have effected some changes in their respective societies through Nonviolent methods. The change in the attitude of whites to blacks in the United States, for example, owe considerably to the Nonviolent campaigns of Luther. Helder Camara, the Catholic Archbishop of Recife, also, was able to effect small scale reformations in Brazil which prepared the people for larger and more significant changes. He achieved this change while choosing the method of Nonviolent resistance on the basis of his consideration that it is both the morally justified option and the most effective strategy of change.

The practicability of the nonviolence option in the most difficult situations of the world is the third basis for our recommendation of it. The above examples do not only show how effective the Nonviolent approach can be, but also that it has been



practiced by men in social situations and contexts that may even be more difficult than the ones most advocates of violence may be addressing.

Thus, the third basis for recommending the path of nonviolence is that it is practicable in the most callous and difficult contexts of today. The dismantling of the iron curtain of communism in former Soviet Union and Eastern Germany and the structures of apartheid in South Africa, mainly through diplomacy, dialogue and negotiation rather than violence, are very convincing demonstrations of both the practicability and effectuality of the Nonviolent approach to structural change. All these examples prove that meaningful changes can take place even within the most callous structures of today by applying this Christian principle of nonviolence.

Finally, nonviolence is being recommended on the basis of its proximity to and consistency with our humanity. Nonviolence is closer to human nature than violence, which is rather alien to it. Gandhi is quoted by Nagler (2014: 2) to have noted that “Nonviolence is the law of our species”. This implies that nonviolence deals with something fundamental about human nature. Its advocacy presents a “higher vision of humanity”, a nostalgic reminder of who we were, while its practice demonstrates a realization of who we wish to be either as individuals or as a people. Therefore, to refuse to adopt nonviolence is to risk violating or compromising our humanity. For this reason, although nonviolence may be a harder and long term option that may require greater sacrifice, patience and courage than violence, it remains, at least, the only process of positive transformation and liberation in society that does not involve or result in losing our humanity.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, we can summarize that Nonviolent approach to social revolution rather than violent methods stands as “a moral means of reaching moral ends’ which have ‘the best long-term chance of success in most of our societies” (Verkuyl & Nordholt 1974: 59). Nonviolence is compatible with the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ. Besides, violence, more often than not, only leads to new forms of despotism and tyranny. Violence as a means of transforming society is, therefore, morally wrong and alien to Christian teaching. It should hence be condemned and rejected both by Christians and all lovers of humanity, peace and progress. Helder Camara’s position on violence and nonviolence as cited by Kee (1974: 139), fully illustrates the Christian stand:

My personal vocation is that of a pilgrim of peace ... Personally, I would prefer a thousand times to be killed than to kill. This personal position is based on the gospel. A whole life spent trying to understand and live the gospel has produced in me the profound conviction that if the gospel can, and should be called revolutionary it is in the sense that it demands the conversion of each of us... We Christians are on the side of nonviolence, which is by no means a choice of weakness or passivity. Nonviolence believing means more passionately to the force of wars, murder and hatred.

From all these, we conclude, from the ethical incompatibility of violence with Christian values, its gross lack of social utility in a moral community; the logical invalidity and inconsistency of its authenticating or legitimizing arguments, and Its inconsistency with and violation of our humanity, that violence is morally wrong.

Conversely, from its compatibility with Christian moral teachings; its effectuality in achieving its noble goal of liberation and transformation; its practicability in the most difficult situations of our contemporary times (as seen from few examples above), and its proximity to and consistency with our humanity, we affirm that nonviolence is both ethically and pragmatically a better and more effective option.

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