

# the historical and philosophical background of modern pacifism

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Although in origin the word Pacifism means merely 'working for peace' or 'the creation of peace', in recent years it has come to mean a code of conduct or a philosophy of life which rejects war of all kinds and relies upon nonviolence as a means of achieving both private and public ends. While, however, this interpretation of the word pacifism is relatively modern, the ideology which lies behind it is very ancient.

We know little about the moral code of primitive man, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that war, in the sense of organised conflict between groups of men specifically trained for that purpose, developed relatively late in human history and, in fact, coincided with the rise of private property in land and other primary sources of wealth and the division of society into classes differing in their privileges and possessions. The desire to secure economic advantages and social prestige, or to defend them if already possessed, led to armed conflict. Tools rather than weapons are found in the surviving remains of the earliest human settlements and no doubt a sort of communism characterised primitive human groups.

But as far back as recorded history goes, which is no more than some six thousand years out of the million or so that man has been on the earth, mankind seems to have been troubled by wars and rumours of wars. At the same time there have been teachers, prophets and philosophers who have pointed out the evils of violence and suggested a better way.

## **The Ancient East**

In the Chinese philosophers Lao-tze and Confucius, around 600 B.C., we find the teaching of nonviolence, of not doing to others what you would not have them do to you, of not resisting your opponents with force. From their teaching developed the philosophy of Taoism, expressed in such sayings as that of Lao-tze: 'There is nothing under the heavens that excels water in tenderness and weakness, yet there is nothing that surpasses it in efficiency when it attacks the hard and the strong' or again in the following passage from a Taoist poem:

The hand that seems to hold but has no weapon in it,  
A host that can confront but has no battle front.  
Now the greatest of all calamities is to attack  
and find no enemy.

He whose enemy presents no front loses his booty.  
Therefore when armies are raised and the issues joined,  
It is he who does not delight in war who wins.'

Almost contemporary with these Chinese teachers was Gautama, in India, known as the Buddha ('the enlightened one'). Buddha's teaching involved nonviolence towards the animal kingdom as well as towards men and has had a widespread influence in Asia and, more recently, in Europe. The story is well-known of King Asoka (264-227 B.C.), ruler of a kingdom extending from Afghanistan to Madras, who in the midst of a career of successful military conquest, became disgusted with war and under the influence of Buddha's teaching, declared, in inscriptions still extant, that he would no longer seek conquest by war but by religion.

### **The World of Greece and Rome**

The most famous of the Ancient Greek philosophers shared similar ideas. In Plato's 'Republic', we find Socrates pointing out the causes of war in economic greed and rivalry and urging a simple life which will not require violence to satisfy its material wants. The Stoic philosophers of the Greco-Roman world taught the brotherhood of man and the universal fellowship of all who accepted this view.

### **Judaism**

In the history of the Jews, as recounted in the Old Testament, we are able to follow the evolution of a people from a barbaric stage in which they worshipped a tribal war-god (a 'god of battles') and practised human sacrifice, through a series of vicissitudes which led them to the idea of a universal god, the replacement of human by animal sacrifice (the story of Abraham and Isaac), and finally the rejection of both animal sacrifice and war. 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'. If these words of the prophet Micah were regarded by his contemporaries as utopian, yet it seems clear that the Jewish sect of the Essenes (about which we are learning much from the Dead Sea Scrolls and recent excavation) which flourished about the beginning of the Christian era, had a definitely pacifist philosophy.

### **Christianity**

The teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, and indeed throughout his ministry, seems clearly to be one of nonviolence, and although the Christian Church as a whole has never accepted this interpretation and in the main still accepts the Doctrine of the Just War as defined by St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, yet the Early Church seems to have rejected war. Its members refused to serve in the Roman army and some even suffered the death penalty for their refusal. It was not until the so-called conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the establishment of a compromise relationship between Church and State, that the Christian Church gave its blessing to war and military service.

Nevertheless throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been individuals and groups who have maintained and practised what they believed to be the nonviolent teaching of the founder. There was, for example, a patriarch of Constantinople in the tenth century who, when the Emperor Nicephorus Phocas wanted the Church to declare that all Christians who died in war against the infidel (Islam) were martyrs to the Christian religion,

stated that all war was unchristian and that a Christian who killed even an infidel enemy in war deserved to be denied the sacraments.

The pacifist attitude of St. Francis of Assisi who went to Egypt to try to persuade the Sultan, when so many of his fellow-christians were engaged in war against the Moslems, is well known. The Middle Ages produced other religious groups, such as the Poor Men of Lyons, and the Bohemian Brethren, which rejected violence.

Direct access to the New Testament, which the Reformation and the invention of printing made possible, encouraged the growth of numerous sects, some of which, such as the Anabaptists and the Mennonites, interpreted the christian teaching in a pacifist sense. The concern which the spread of such ideas caused to established authority is evidenced by the introduction into the Articles of the Church of England, as established in the mid-sixteenth century, of Article 37 which declares that 'it is lawful for christian men, at the command of the magistrate, to wear weapons and serve in the wars.'

### **The Age of Reason**

The sixteenth century was a period in which despotic governments flourished and found in Machiavelli's famous book 'The Prince' (*Il Principe* 1532) political justification. But an opposing position was put forward by the French writer Etienne de la Boétie in his 'Anti-Dictator: a Discourse on Voluntary Servitude' (*Anti-Dictator: Discours sur la Servitude Volontaire*, ca. 1548). He points out that dictators depend for their power on the more or less voluntary obedience of their subjects and that therefore a policy of non-co-operation would lead to the collapse of their power. La Boétie is quoted at some length by Tolstoy in his pamphlet 'The One Thing Needful', which is concerned particularly with the nature of government and its inherent evil.

The seventeenth century in Europe was one of outstanding war and violence, the new national States contending with one another for supremacy and the authority of monarchs being challenged by their subjects. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) laid waste the heart of Europe. In these circumstances many great minds devoted themselves to the problem of war and peace. The Dutchman Grotius laid the foundations of modern international law in his books on the Freedom of the Seas (*Mare Liberum*, 1618) and the law of War and Peace (*De Jure Belli et Pacis*, 1625). Henry IV of France and the Duke of Sully produced 'The Great Design: a Plan for Perpetual Peace' which proposed the transformation of Europe into a confederation of States of more or less equal strength, disputes between which were to be settled by an International Court. The German philosopher Baron Samuel de Pufendorf in his 'Elements of Universal Jurisprudence' (1660) and his 'Treatise on the Law of Nature and of Nations' (1672) argued the case for the elimination of war on the basis of man's social instinct and reason. William Penn, the English Quaker, in his 'Essay towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe' (ca. 1693), proposed the reference of disputes to a great Court of Arbitration (a principle he had already put into practice in his colony of Pennsylvania). Finally, the French Abbé de St. Pierre produced in his 'Project of Perpetual Peace' (1713), a scheme for a system of alliances among the States of Christendom

and a sort of International Tribunal. Although the Abbé gave much thought to the development of this scheme, it did not attract wide attention until it was republished by Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1756 with an appreciative commentary. He himself wrote an 'Essay on the State of War' (found among the Neuchâtel mss) in which he analyses the causes of wars and shows how they fail to produce the ends aimed at.

### **The Role of the Quakers**

All these schemes were the product of an Age of Reason, which saw the irrationality of war and thought that it could be eliminated by appropriate governmental action. They were certainly pacifist in that their object was the creation of peace. However, at the same time, the emphasis on individual responsibility and the personal moral commitment to reject 'all warfare with carnal weapons' was made by the Quakers in England, and later in their settlement in Pennsylvania, across the Atlantic. From the mid-seventeenth century to the present day the Society of Friends (the Quakers) has been the leading pacifist sect among the various *Christian denominations and has exercised an influence on pacifist thought and action out of all proportion to its numbers. No doubt this has been due not only to the personal integrity of its members and their steadfastness under persecution, but also to their combination of individual refusal of military service with active participation in all sorts of movements to create a more peaceful society, to 'live in that spirit which taketh away the occasion of wars'.*

### **The French Revolution**

Up to the end of the eighteenth century wars were mainly fought by mercenary armies in the pay of rulers, and the soldiers were not necessarily of the same nationality as the ruler employing them. The French Revolution introduced mass armies, with strong national and/or revolutionary fervour. It also introduced conscription in the modern world. It therefore produced the inevitable reaction. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, published his 'Treatise on Perpetual Peace' (1795) in which he advocated a federation of free States bound together by a covenant forbidding war. Reason, he argued, utterly condemns war; only an international government can prevent it. At the end of the Napoleonic wars the establishment of the Peace Society in England (perhaps the first organisation of its kind) evidenced the popular reaction against war, while the creation of the Holy Alliance among the European Governments (hypocritical as most of its signatories no doubt were) made some show of deference to the views of Immanuel Kant.

What the French Revolution had done was not only to make military conscription a characteristic of most European States, but also to associate military service with democracy and thus give it a certain acceptability. Nevertheless, the fact that future wars were going to involve whole nations and not merely a relatively few mercenaries, made people think more seriously of the implications. It was also clear that the possession of large armies increased the power of governments, their tendency to act arbitrarily, and to resort to war to achieve their ends.

### **Civil Disobedience**

It was Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), in the United

States, who first made this issue clear in his essay: 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience' (originally published in 1849 under the title 'Resistance to Civil Government'). The essence of his argument may be illustrated by the following sentences from its opening paragraph:

'I believe—"That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, *inexpedient*. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican War, the work of comparatively few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.' The moral was clear: the right and duty of responsible citizens to refuse military service.

Three years earlier, in 1846, Adin Ballou, founder of the Hopedale Community in America, had published 'Christian Non-Resistance in all its Important Bearings, Illustrated and Defended'. This work (which is a classic statement of the doctrine of non-resistance—as distinct from nonviolent forms of resistance) is chiefly of interest because of the influence it exercised on Tolstoy.

The horror and bitterness of the American Civil War (1861-65), the psychological results of which are felt in the Southern States to this day, provoked expression of pacifist feeling. The responsibility of the individual for his actions was clearly expressed in the homely verses of the Quaker poet James Russell Lowell (1819-1891):

'As for war, I call it murder,  
There you have it plain and flat,  
I don't need to go no further  
Than my Testament for that.  
If you take a sword and draw it  
And go stick a fellow through,  
Governments won't answer for it,  
God will send the bill to you'.

### **The Psychological Approach**

Most of this pacifist thinking had been based on religious or ethical considerations. A more rational approach was introduced by the American philosopher and psychologist, William James (1842-1910). In his essay 'The Moral Equivalent of War' (1910) he acknowledged the social value of many of the military virtues—discipline, obedience, courage, self-sacrifice, and argued that, despite its expense and horror, war would never be abandoned unless some other means of encouraging and using these virtues were substituted. He advocated the institution of a form of conscription for socially useful work of an unpleasant, difficult or dangerous character. (It is interesting to see how this proposal has in fact been taken up in the many forms of national and international service undertaken today, though generally on a voluntary basis.)

## Tolstoy and Gandhi

The greatest influences, however, in the creation of the modern pacifist movement, have been those of Leo Tolstoy and M. K. Gandhi. The former strongly influenced many of the pacifists of the First World War generation and the latter those of the Second World War generation and subsequently.

Leo Nikolayevitch Tolstoy (1828-1910) was of a Russian noble family, fought in the Crimean War and for a time lived the normal life of the landed nobility. Coming under progressive influences, he freed the serfs on his estate, Yasnaya Polyana, and in 1895, he renounced property, gave up all money and worldly goods and, until his death lived as an ordinary peasant. His literary output was tremendous; in his earlier life, history and novels; in his later years religious and social subjects. Failing to find the answers to his problems in science and philosophy, he turned to the Christian religion, made a profound study of the Gospels and there, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount and in the five commandments of Jesus (Matthew v, vi, vii), he found the principles which henceforth guided his life. Armies, law-courts, property, he saw as contrary to the teaching of Christ. He therefore advocated a complete social revolution, but one to be achieved by nonviolent means—a communist society based on voluntary co-operation. It was through the conversion of individuals and their personal renunciation of all use of force and possession of private property, that society was to be reformed. Tolstoy's pacifist teaching is to be found in practically all of his later writings. Particularly important are 'The Kingdom of God is within you', 'A Confession', 'Letter to a Sergeant', 'Thou Shalt Not Kill', 'The Law of Violence and the Law of Love'. His 'Letter to the Swedes on the Peace Conference' 1899, showed how little could be expected from the Hague Conference of that year, and indeed of governmental disarmament conferences in general, while his 'Letter to a Hindu' (1908) addressed to Tarakuatta Das, who was advocating violent resistance against British rule in India, put the case against the use of violence for the purpose of national liberation.

The spread of Tolstoy's pacifist teaching was much encouraged by the establishment at Christchurch in Hampshire at the end of the 19th century, of the Tuckton House Community—a group of Tolstoyans, including Vladimir Tchertkov, Tolstoy's sometime secretary, who had been forced by the persecution of the Czarist government to leave Russia. They established a publishing house, The Free Age Press ('No rights reserved'), which issued in very cheap paper-back form English translations of a very large number of Tolstoy's works. They also printed in Russia and smuggled into Russia, a number of his works for clandestine distribution there. Naturally his revolutionary ideas were quite unacceptable to the government of that country.

There is no doubt that Tolstoy had a considerable influence on the development of Gandhi's thinking, as did also an English 19th century writer John Ruskin (1819-1900). Ruskin is remembered more as an art critic than as a social reformer but in his lifetime he had a considerable influence in the latter field, particularly in his advocacy of social change by peaceful and educational methods. His chief work in this field is 'Unto this Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy'

published in 1895. In 1933 there was published in India 'Unto this Last: A Paraphrase' by M. K. Gandhi.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) has undoubtedly had the greatest influence on the development of pacifist thought throughout the world in the mid-twentieth century. It is impossible in this short essay to express adequately the significance of the Mahatma ('Great Soul'), as his countrymen called him, on world thinking and world events. Innumerable books and articles have been written about his ideas and achievements and his own writings, particularly his autobiography 'The Story of my Experiments with Truth', are a mine of information and inspiration. He gave to the concept of nonviolence a new dimension and a greater depth. In his description of nonviolence as *satyagraha* or soul-force, he gave it a universal spiritual significance. Gandhi combined in a remarkable way the roles of the teacher and the practical reformer. Without ever holding any political or academic office, possessing any wealth or directing any economic enterprise, he has probably done more to change the world than any other man in this century. His work for the Indian minority in South Africa, then for the liberation of India from British rule (recognised only a few months before his assassination in 1948) and finally for the emancipation of the peasants of India, constitute a notable achievement. But far more important in the long run is, and will be, his emphasis on the method by which peoples are to be liberated from oppression (whether foreign or domestic), the method of nonviolence, the way of love and self-sacrifice. Not to use physical violence against the oppressor is only the first step. One has to go further, to seek to understand him, to love him and to persuade him. The aim is not to overcome one's enemy but to convert him and turn him into a friend. This is a hard but a very profound teaching.

### **Other Pacifist Writers**

It seems somewhat of an anti-climax, after Tolstoy and Gandhi, to mention other late nineteenth and twentieth century pacifist thinkers. But two or three names should not be forgotten, notably Jean de Bloch, Bertha von Suttner, Barthelmy De Ligt, Aldous Huxley, Hem Day and Albert Schweitzer.

Jean de Bloch (1836-1902), a Polish financier of Jewish descent, administrator of the railway system connecting the Black Sea and the Baltic, became famous as a propagandist of universal peace, a subject on which he wrote numerous articles and to which he devoted his great work entitled '*La Guerre*' (1898), translated into English in 1899 under the title: 'Is War Impossible?' He argued that war should be abandoned because under modern conditions it would not pay even the victor. (A similar argument was used by the English writer Sir Norman Angell, in his book 'The Great Illusion' 1910). Bloch's writings are said to have influenced Czar Nicholas II to issue his peace declaration of 1898 which led to the First Hague Conference.

Bertha von Suttner, born in 1843 in Prague, really belongs to the 19th century, although she lived till 1914. Daughter of an Austrian Field Marshal, she became Baroness von Suttner by marriage. At one time secretary to Alfred Nobel, she is said to have influenced him to establish the Nobel Peace Prize, of which she was a recipient in 1905. Her book '*Die Waffen Nieder!*' 1889 (English translation 'Lay Down Your Arms!' 1892) was published

in twelve languages and had a considerable influence on public opinion. In '*Das Maschinenzeitalter*' (The Machine Age'), 1899, she revealed the scientific and free-thinking basis of her pacifism. She founded the *Friedensgesellschaft* (Peace Society) in Austria in 1891.

Barthelmy De Ligt (1883-1938), Dutch anarchist, an advocate of revolution and a student of its methods, demonstrated in '*The Conquest of Violence: an Essay on War and Revolution*' 1937, the extent to which in the course of history, important changes had been brought about by nonviolent means and how this method could and should be used in future (see especially Chapter VI: '*The Effectiveness of the Nonviolent Struggle*').

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), an Englishman who spent the latter part of his life in the United States, compiled '*An Encyclopædia of Pacifism*' which was published in London for the Peace Pledge Union in 1937, but far more important was his book '*Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization*' published in the same year. In this influential work he demonstrated that contrary to the old saying 'the end justifies the means', the means employed in fact determines the end. Therefore peace cannot be achieved by warlike means, nor can a peaceful social order be attained through a violent revolution. If Gandhi had given us the spiritual case for nonviolence, Aldous Huxley gave us the rational case.

Hem Day (pen-name of Marcel Dieu) (1902-1969) the Belgian anarchist pacifist, was a prolific writer of pamphlets and articles and a frequent lecturer, especially to working-class audiences in many countries. He had a considerable influence on the development of ideas of nonviolence in revolutionary circles.

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), the German musician, theologian and philosopher, who became a medical missionary and established a world famous hospital at Lambarene in the heart of tropical Africa, where most of his later life was spent, contributed to pacifist thought the principle of 'reverence for life'—for all life. In '*Kultur und Ethik*' (English translation '*Civilisation and Ethics*' 1923) he reviewed the history of ethical thought, leading to his own original and positive contribution of reverence for life as the true and effective basis for a civilised world.

### **Pacifism and Realpolitik**

If one asks how far this growth of pacifist ideas in the modern world has had any practical influence in the world of *Realpolitik* it is not easy to arrive at a decisive judgment. Certainly the twentieth century has seen the greatest wars in history and the greatest expenditure on armaments. Nevertheless looking back over the century and a half since the Napoleonic wars, one must note certain developments, which even if one regards them as no more than governmental concessions to public opinion (vice paying court to virtue!) at least indicate the strength of that public opinion. Among these may be noted:

1. **The growth of arbitration for the settlement of international conflicts.** The first important international arbitration treaty was the Jay Treaty, 1784, concerning the boundary between Canada and U.S.A. which has resulted in the longest unarmed frontier in the world (3000 miles). Between 1821 and 1840, eight International Arbitration



Treaties were signed, 1841-60 twenty, 1861-80 forty-four, 1881-1900 ninety and the number has continued to grow. Some 300 international disputes were settled by arbitration between 1815 and 1914—some of a major character such as the Alabama Case 1871 and the Dogger Bank Incident, 1905.

2. **The Series of Disarmament Conferences.** The first of these, the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907, summoned by the Czar Nicholas II, led to the establishment of the Hague International Court of Arbitration and the prohibition of certain weapons, but made no progress towards disarmament. The Peace Palace in the Hague (now the seat of the International Court of Justice) was built by Andrew Carnegie to house the Third Hague Conference (1914) which owing to the outbreak of War never took place. Disarmament Conferences (especially that of 1932) have been held periodically since the 1920's but with little to their credit except some restrictions on nuclear tests (1963).
3. **International Organisation.** The League of Nations, with which were associated the International Labour Organisation in Geneva and the Permanent Court of International Justice in the Hague, was established in 1920 and was replaced in 1945, after the Second World War, by the United Nations with its headquarters in New York. It took over from its predecessor the International Labour Organisation and the Permanent Court of International Justice, renamed the International Court of Justice. It has added a large number of specialized agencies: World Health Organisation, Food and Agriculture Organisation, International Monetary Fund, International Civil Aviation Organisation and many others which are gradually constructing the framework of an international society and providing internationally negotiated solutions to many human problems, thus removing some of the causes of conflict.

### **Postscript**

This essay has been concerned with the background of modern pacifism. It has not attempted to analyse the various streams of contemporary pacifist thought nor to describe the organisations through which they find expression. Those who wish to study this aspect should contact such bodies as the War Resisters' International (3, Caledonian Road, London, N.1) and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (Box 91, Driebergen 2760, Netherlands) or their various national sections and affiliates.

Those wishing to pursue further the subject of the essay are recommended to consult 'Nonviolent Action—a Selected Bibliography' by April Carter, David Hoggett and Adam Roberts, published by Housmans, 5 Caledonian Road, London, N.1.