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What's said about the church are the thoughts of Tolstoy. Without necessarily agreeing with all he says, I have extended the case to Buddhism - for a Sri Lankan, predominantly Buddhist – readership. The concern is why so many Buddhists in the Island countenance - if not actually incite - violence.)

Tolstoy: the state, religion and violence

The following is an attempt to focus on Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is within You* (1894), in relation to the aspects mentioned above. Page reference is to the Dover Publications edition, New York, 2006, and the work is abbreviated as KGWY. The majority of Sri Lankans being Buddhist, reference is made to Buddhism, though Tolstoy himself does not mention Buddhism in KGWY. Gandhi read KGWY while in South Africa and, as he records in his *Autobiography*, it "overwhelmed" him. (See, among other works, Kathryn Tidrick's *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life*, London, 2006.) Gandhi influenced many individuals, including Martin Luther King and, in Sri Lanka, S J V Chelvanayagam.

Violence is an evil, repugnant to the basic principles of religion, particularly to Christianity and Buddhism because the very essence of these two religions is non-violence, peace and goodwill towards all. The existence of violence, therefore, is because belief has become external, formal and nominal; because people have "cunningly devised theories" (p. 209) which superficially "reconcile the irreconcilable" (p. 2), that is, violence and religion. In certain situations, it is argued, violence is permitted. Going further, in a grotesque corruption of religion, it is claimed that violence can be perpetrated in the name of Christ (or of the Buddha). This conviction serves not only to legitimise violence but to encourage it. Violence in the name of religion means there is no need to spare even the pregnant mother, or medical staff trying to succour the injured, the dying, the distressed.

To argue that violence is permitted (even laudable) in certain circumstances, is to be selective. For example, the assertion that, sometimes, there are exceptional circumstances where the religious prohibition against killing can be ignored is not

applied to sex outside marriage. Where violence is concerned, “they openly teach that we must not understand it too literally, but that there are conditions and circumstances in which we must do the direct opposite” (p. 32), but not when it comes to sex. Religion and state say that, while the teaching of Christ (or of the Buddha) is noble, in the real world (when it comes to violence and killing) it is impractical, even inadvisable. If a man (or men) kills one or more of his fellow-creatures, he is a murderer. “But a government [...] may kill as many men as it chooses, and that will not be murder, but a great and noble action. One man cannot plunder and pillage, but a whole nation can” (p. 9).

The perversion of religion, Tolstoy argues, is possible because the state and official religion collaborate and cooperate with each other. Anyone who opposes organised religious views and practice is a heretic; anyone going against the state is a traitor. These “two ruling powers” (p. 16) constantly aid each other in the pursuit of power. Together, claims Tolstoy, they deceive and dominate the people, keeping them in superstitious awe (religion) and fear (the state). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ preached that those who are merciful, those who make peace, are the blessed. But at the meeting of the first ecumenical council in Nicaea (Common Era 325) what is now known as the Nicene Creed was formulated, bestowing authority and religious monopoly on the church (p. 74). Thereafter, to disagree with the church meant one was not a Christian. (Similarly, one component of ‘the Triple Gem’ of Buddhism is the *sangha* or Buddhist clergy.) The clergy’s interpretation of religion is right – even when it is blatantly contrary to the actual teaching of Christ (or the Buddha). And so a god of their own is invented, one who - contrary to his own words - is said to permit, even make obligatory, violence and warfare (p. 29).

Various devices are utilised to hypnotise people, and “to bring them to a state of stupefaction” (p. 73), among them, the use of lighting and chanting. Temples, incense, the veneration and taking in procession of relics, all serve to awe the people and induce in them a thoughtless belief in what institutionalised, state-supported, religion proclaims (p. 172). The result is that the supernatural element, and not the ethical teaching, becomes the essence of religion (p. 95). In turn, it means that one does not strive to do good works (p. 67), though Christ (and the Buddha) made it clear that what counts is not outward show and protestation, but actual conduct.

The collaboration between state and religion, together with the focus on the supernatural, and the consequent neglect of the ethical core of religious teaching, help to explain why priests have countenanced, even supported, the violence and cruelty wreaked by the government of the day. During Nazi rule, many priests and Christians remained silent, avoided confronting injustice and violence or, worse, justified and supported the actions of the state. Parallels with Sri Lanka come to mind, both from modern and ancient times. For the latter, I quote from an essay of mine.

The Mahavamsa records that King Dutugemunu, having caused the destruction of a great many lives, was concerned he would not attain *nirvana*. Thereupon, Buddhist monks comforted him, saying he had killed only one and a half men: the one was a Buddhist and the other only on the path to becoming a Buddhist. The others who died, being non-Buddhist, were but animals. “But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha” (*The Mahavamsa*, end of Chapter XXV). One is appalled that human beings can be seen and treated as if they were animals; incredulous that such an inhumane attitude could be proudly espoused in the name of the gentlest of religions. The Buddha in his sermon on loving kindness (the *Karaneeya metha Sutra*) urged the cultivation of loving thoughts towards all: May *all* beings be well and happy. May we cultivate boundless love for all beings. Let these thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world, without any hatred, without any enmity.

The above is an example of religion and state buttressing each other. Tolstoy (deeply spiritual, seen by many during his last years as a living saint) argues that Christianity has ceased to be Christian – one could, by extension, say that Buddhism in Sri Lanka, by and large, is no longer Buddhist. Yet the destiny of humanity in the world depends on the fidelity of men and women to the ethics of their religion (p. 20). This is not to forget that there were, and are good and heroic priests and monks, but (Tolstoy argues, p. 62) the goodness and worth of these men were theirs, and not of the institutions they served. (The rise of ‘liberation theology’ committed to the poor and oppressed would appear to support Tolstoy’s claim.) The essence of religion to

Tolstoy was not the supernatural; not ritual and chanting, not the veneration of relics but in trying to follow the actual teaching of Christ: in the Sri Lankan context, of the Buddha. Do not, in the very name of the Teacher, go against His teaching (p. 24).

Within herself or himself, each woman and man knows what is good, and what constitutes vice. These notions, Tolstoy says, are derived from religion. (One could add, also from our basic sense of humanity and consideration for others.) The answer is to give these “innerly” held notions of virtue expression in our outer conduct as citizens (p. 176). Absolute “perfection can never be attained” (p. 86). What makes someone truly religious is the attempt, the striving – a thought recognised and emphasised by the Buddha. You cannot say you are a Christian (or Buddhist) unless that fact changes how you live and behave towards all living beings (p. 97). To be good means *doing* good, and “doing good” is attempting to put into practice what Christ, or the Buddha, actually taught.

Tolstoy believed that if the world were to become religious in the true sense, then there would be no need for the state to exist: one of the reasons why those in power support institutionalised religion. The kingdom of God is not somewhere outside but within you. It is a thought echoed by a Buddhist scholar: “Nirvana has to be attained while one is living, and not after death.”

Religion recognises an infinite extension of the sphere of love. It calls us not to live against our nature – understood to be our animal nature – but according to our true nature, which is love. What is important in religious teaching is not the supernatural but the moral, the ethical (pp. 92-5).

Charles Sarvan (Yet again, with thanks to Liebetraut)