

Contribution to the International Conference on Peace, Prudence & Prosperity (ICP3) organised by School of Education, Centre of Liberal Arts & IQAC, Apeejay Stya University in collaboration with International Centre of Gandhian Studies & Research, Gandhi Smriti & Darshan, Ministry of Culture, Government of India (August 5-6, 2022) - Lecture on:

Erasmus, Kant and Gandhi - Philosophy on Peace and Prosperity

Abstract:

""War is sweet to those who have no experience of it ..." - Protest against Violence and War is a new exhibition (2017) dedicated to the humanist and pacifist Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536), whose anti-war writings "Dulce bellum inexpertis" (1515) and "Querela pacis" (1517) were published more than five hundred years ago. This exhibition has been recently published, and it is time to introduce this to a wider audience now. Erasmus vividly described the flourishing of economy and society during times of peace: an encouraging vision of the absence of wars, perpetual peace. In addition, Immanuel Kant's philosophical sketch "Perpetual Peace" (1795) shall remind us in which direction international law and politics should find a turning point at last. The visions of both thinkers coincide with Mahatma Gandhi's utopian vision of a peaceful world federation."

Let us recollect the precious heritage of peace philosophy in Europe. Almost three hundred years ago Immanuel Kant was born – in two years there will be European-wide celebrations to commemorate this philosopher whose 1795 tract "Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch" may serve as a basis for understanding peace philosophy. Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher and one of the central Enlightenment thinkers, born in Koenigsberg (which is nowadays Kaliningrad). He was an exponent of the idea that perpetual peace could be secured through universal democracy and international cooperation.

This tract is structured in two parts: The "Preliminary Articles" described these steps that should be taken immediately, or with all deliberate speed:

"No secret treaty of peace shall be held valid in which there is tacitly reserved matter for a future war"

"No independent states, large or small, shall come under the dominion of another state by inheritance, exchange, purchase, or donation"

"Standing armies shall in time be totally abolished"

"National debts shall not be contracted with a view to the external friction of states"

"No state shall by force interfere with the constitution or government of another state"

"No state shall, during war, permit such acts of hostility which would make mutual confidence in the subsequent peace impossible: such are the employment of assassins (percussores), poisoners (venefici), breach of capitulation, and incitement to treason (perduellio) in the opposing state"

And he added three Definitive Articles would provide not merely a cessation of hostilities, but a foundation on which to build a peace.

I.—"The civil constitution of each state shall be republican."

II.—"The law of nations shall be founded on a federation of free states."

III.—"The rights of men, as citizens of the world, shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality."

And now I refer to the second point: "afederation of free states", because this world republic or world federation was a vision which was shared by Mahatma Gandhi. In 1942, at the peak of the Second World War, Gandhi expressed his vision for India and the World:

“If I can get freedom for India now through non-violent means, power of non-violence is firmly established, Empire idea dissolves and world State takes its place, in which all the States of the world are free and equal, no State has its military, there may be a world police to keep order in the absence of universal belief in non-violence.” (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, volume 76, page 341: “Letter to Maurice Frydman”, Sevagram, July 28, 1942)

“We are aiming at a world federation in which India would be a leading unit. It can come only through non-violence. Disarmament is only possible if you use the matchless weapon of non-violence.” (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, volume 76, page 381: “Speech at All India Congress Committee Meeting”. Bombay, August 7, 1942; zitiert nach: The Hitavada, 9-8-1942; also The Bombay Chronicle, 8-8-1942)

And three years later he confirmed his belief in this concept of a world federation, „if it is built on an essentially non-violent basis.“ (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, volume 79, page 422: „Interview to Ralph Coniston, before April 25, 1945“; zitiert nach: Mahatma Gandhi—The Last Phase, Vol. I, Book I, p. 116)

Now let us remember that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared this vision of a “world house”, and in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (April 16, 1963) he distinguished between „a negative peace which is the absence of tension” and “a positive peace which is the presence of justice” (Martin Luther King, Jr.: Chapter “Letter from a Birmingham Jail (April 16, 1963).” In: Why We Can’t Wait (1964) – Erstausgabe: Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”. Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, May 1963)

Gandhi linked his concept of Truth with Nonviolence:

A Message

Sabarmati, March 13, 1927

“God is Truth. The way to Truth lies through Ahimsa (non-violence).

M.K. Gandhi”

(The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 33, p. 155)

And I summarized these four elements of Gandhi’s peace legacy: International Law (because Gandhi was a lawyer), (Nuclear) Disarmament, Sustainable Development and World Federation:

“Based on the Principles of Truth through Nonviolence, Gandhi provided with Satyagraha a political paradigm for nonviolent resistance by the oppressed people in world societies.

The term Satyagraha was coined in January 1908: a combination of active civil disobedience, nonviolent non-cooperation and fearless pursuit of Justice as well as firmness in Truth! This alternative to civil wars and bloody uprisings meant a new basis for organised nonviolent resistance.

Gandhi – as a lawyer and as a publisher who wrote editorials of his weekly magazine “Indian Opinion” – sought to attract the attention of a wider public to abolish unjust laws. Racial prejudice and socio-economic discrimination were the core targets in his quest for equality, human rights and justice.

His experiences as stretcher-bearer in cruel wars brought him to foster (nuclear) disarmament and peace. His concept of Shanti Sena was the nucleus of a nonviolent peace army to stop violent conflicts by active interposition and intervention. Economic boycotts and sanctions were instruments to dramatize the slavery yoke of colonialism and imperialism.”

Immanuel Kant had a French precursor, Charles-Irénée Castel, abbé de Saint-Pierre – he might have been one of the first who proposed an international organisation to maintain peace. This practical proposal included ideas like:

an equitable tax system, including a graduated income tax,
free public education, for women as well as men,
state improvement of transportation to further commerce,
an international court and league of states (Projet de paix perpétuelle 1713).

These ideas were the core principles of an European Union, and this Pan-European vision influenced Rousseau, also Voltaire, and then cherished by Voltaire's friendly correspondent Frederic, the young Prussian Prince and later King (not in a sustainable way, least to mention). This is just a brief recourse on European's early peace theories.

The Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus had been working for years on two projects: a collation of Greek texts and a fresh Latin New Testament. In 1512, he began his work on this Latin New Testament. He collected all the Vulgate manuscripts he could find to create a critical edition. So he included the Greek text to permit qualified readers to verify the quality of his Latin version.

Erasmus was a friend of Thomas Morus who wrote the first utopian novel called "Utopia". Erasmus, in his lifetime, faced a bellicose, belligerent Pope why he wrote his first anti-war essay "War is sweet to those who have no experience of it ..." ("Dulce Bellum Inexpertis", 1515) and "The Complaint of Peace" ("Querela Pacis", 1517) was a polemic against war: the voice of peace accusing mankind. To give you a glimpse, how according to Erasmus Peace fosters flourishing and prosperity, I quote his own words:

""In times of peace it is just as if a fresh spring sun has begun to shine on human affairs; fields are cultivated, gardens turn green, flocks graze contentedly, farms are established and towns rise, fallen buildings are restored, others ornamented and enlarged, wealth increases, pleasures are nurtured, law is in repute, statecraft flourishes, religion is fervent, justice reigns, goodwill prevails, artisans practice their crafts with skill, the earnings of the poor are greater and the opulence of the rich more splendid. The study of the most noble subjects thrives, youth is educated, old age enjoys a peaceful leisure, girls are happily married ..."

("Dulce bellum inexpertis. War is a treat for those who have not tried it.", in: Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 35: Adages III iv to IV ii 100, translated and annotated by Denis L. Drysdall. edited by John N. Grant, Toronto/Buffalo/London 2005, p. 413)

And Desiderius Erasmus, Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Dutch humanist whose first essay was an essay against war and in favour of peace found an expression of what we can sign even today:

""All honour to those who have used their talents or wisdom for the prevention of war and the establishment of concord; in short, to the man who has directed all his efforts, not to procuring the greatest force of fighting men and engines of war, but to ensuring that there shall be no need of them."

("A Complaint of Peace Spurned and Rejected by the Whole World. Querela Pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque". Translated and annotated by Betty Radice, in: Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 27, edited by A.H.T. Levi. Toronto/Buffalo/London 2005, p. 312)

"The majority of the common people loathe war and pray for peace; only a handful of individuals, whose evil joys depend on general misery, desire war. Whether it is right or not for their wickedness to prevail over the will of all honest men is for you yourselves to judge ..."

War springs from war, revenge brings further revenge. Now let generosity breed generosity, kind actions invite further kindness ..."

("A Complaint of Peace Spurned and Rejected by the Whole World. Querela Pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque". Translated and annotated by Betty Radice, in: Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 27, edited

by A.H.T. Levi. Toronto/Buffalo/London 2005, p. 321)

“Finally, the greatest element in peace is a heartfelt desire for it.

Those who truly have peace at heart snatch at every opportunity for it; they ignore or remove the obstacles in the way and put up with a lot, so long as this greatest of blessings is unimpaired.”

(“A Complaint of Peace Spurned and Rejected by the Whole World. Querela Pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque”. Translated and annotated by Betty Radice, in: Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 27, edited by A.H.T. Levi. Toronto/Buffalo/London 2005, p. 314)

And remembers the ancient prophets’ history which Gandhi referred frequently, for example Daniel, and we should also do so like Erasmus, for example Isaiah:

“Think of the mighty prophet Isaiah: when he was inspired by the divine spirit and prophesied that Christ would come to unite the world, did he promise a tyrant, a sacker of cities, a warrior, a conqueror? He did not.

What then did he promise ? A prince of peace. Isaiah wished it to be understood that his Prince was the best of all princes, and so he named him after that quality which he judged to be best.”

(“A Complaint of Peace Spurned and Rejected by the Whole World. Querela Pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque”. Translated and annotated by Betty Radice, in: Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 27, edited by A.H.T. Levi. Toronto/Buffalo/London 2005, p. 299)

““Hence it is, I believe, that the word ‘humane’ is generally applied to anything to do with mutual good will.

Man has also the capacity for tears, proof of a disposition which is readily persuaded, so that if some difference has arisen and a cloud has overcast the clear sky of friendship, a reconciliation can easily be achieved.

Now take a look at all the reasons Nature has provided for concord.”

(“A Complaint of Peace Spurned and Rejected by the Whole World. Querela Pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque”. Translated and annotated by Betty Radice, in: Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 27, edited by A.H.T. Levi. Toronto/Buffalo/London 2005, p. 295)

Concord is the name of the city of Transcendentalists in the United States of America, the great legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and other great spirits with Utopian farms, settlements trying to build an alternative economy for prosperity, for peace.