
The non-violence of HELDER CAMARA

Helder Camara is a bishop in Brazil, a land of great wealth for the few and of grinding poverty for the millions, a land ripe for violent revolution. He asks for justice for the poor through truth and love; he asks the church itself to embrace poverty, the poor to love those who oppress them, everyone to turn the other cheek, to choose the way of total non-violence.

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by **BRUCE KENT**

IN APRIL 1977 the tiny Archbishop from Recife and Olinda in Brazil, Helder Camara, came all the way to Derry in Northern Ireland. He came to meet others from many countries to discuss peace and justice on a world wide scale with a view to getting the human family to live together not by violence and fear, but by love and non-violence. So little is understood about non-violence that it seemed a good idea to put some of Archbishop Camara's beliefs down for us all to share. But first of all, who is he?



I started by calling him my Archbishop, and at five feet three inches and 110 pounds so he is. But you have undoubtedly read in the newspapers that he is a most remarkable man. He came to London to give a talk and his audience was packed.

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IN APRIL 1977 the tiny Archbishop from Recife and Olinda in Brazil, Helder Camara, came all the way to Derry in Northern Ireland. He came to meet others from many countries to discuss peace and justice on a world wide scale with a view to getting the human family to live together not by violence and fear, but by love and non-violence. So little is understood about non-violence that it seemed a good idea to put some of Archbishop Camara's beliefs down on paper for us all to share. But first of all, who is he?

I started by calling him a tiny Archbishop, and at five feet three inches and 118 pounds so he is. But you have only to meet him to realise that he is one of the most remarkable men of our times. In 1972 he came to London to give a talk at the St Pancras Town Hall. It was packed

full, with hundreds of people spellbound by what he said. So it is whenever he speaks – even in the broken English which he calls, with a smile, ‘Camarese’.

He was born in 1909 in a little town in the North East of Brazil. His mother was a devout Catholic school-teacher and his father, who didn’t like the thought of a saint’s name, picked ‘Helder’ out of a dictionary – the name of a fortified town in the Northern part of the Netherlands! Helder had twelve brothers and sisters of whom five died within twenty-nine days of each other in a very bad epidemic of croup.

He went to the minor seminary and then on to the major seminary where he was ordained in 1931 at the age of twenty two and a half. He was then made chaplain to a catholic action group of workers and students and in 1934 became Secretary of Education in his own small state. In 1936 he was asked by a friend, in what we would call the Ministry of Education, to come to Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the country, to continue this work there. This was to be his vocation until 1964 though he managed a large number of other jobs as a priest as well.

Once in Rome, for instance, in 1950, he managed to persuade a certain Monsignor Montini, later Pope Paul VI, to set up the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil in which, as secretary, Dom Helder was to be the moving spirit. In 1952 he became a Bishop and in 1955 he organised the great Eucharistic Congress of Rio.

A conversation after the Congress with Cardinal Gerlier of Lyons in France set him on a new line of activity. “Why don’t you put your organising skill,” said the Cardinal, “to doing something about the terrible conditions of the slum poor?” Archbishop Camara of Recife and Olinda, as he became in 1964, did just that. First of all he preached poverty to the Church: “Providence” he told the other Bishops in 1963 at the Vatican Council, “has already delivered us from the Papal States. When will the hour of God come which will bring the Church back to rejoin Lady Poverty?” In his own life he practised what he preached; he lives today in simplicity in what was a church sacristy but has now been turned into his home. His bedroom is separated from the Baroque high altar of the old church by a wooden partition. His day is one of profound prayer of which his morning six o’clock mass is the focus. Often he is up at two in the morning to pray and write.

The Archbishop has also made it his work to understand why grinding poverty exists. He made his own the saying of Gandhi: “The earth has enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.” He now realised that the land-owning system put the vast estates of Brazil into the hands of a minute percentage of its rich people and that the operations of the great international companies transferred the wealth of the country to shareholders far away.

For this kind of thinking he soon became unpopular with the powerful and wealthy and was nicknamed 'the red archbishop' even though his arguments were fully supported by the Church's teaching on social justice, especially by Pope Paul's great letter '*Populorum Progressio*' (CTS S273). In 1969 a close associate, Fr Neto, was most brutally assassinated. Archbishop Camara himself has been frequently threatened and once even had a conversation with a prospective assassin who changed his mind. But danger has not deterred him. A real apostle of social justice, he believes not in violence but in non-violence as a way of achieving it. What does this mean in practical terms?

THE SPIRAL OF VIOLENCE

Perhaps it would be best, first of all, to make it quite clear that the 'red archbishop' is a totally unfair title. Archbishop Camara belongs to no political bloc but is a Christian who sincerely believes that God has given everything he has made to all the human family on trust to share. His condemnations of the Soviet system have been just as firm as his rejection of a capitalism of power and profit. In a lecture in 1972 in Munich he said; "Russia has become as imperialist as any capitalist super-power. Moscow has its satellites on whom it imposes by force its unique model of socialism. Any of them which tries to step out of line will be crushed as were Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The satellites have to provide Russia with their industrial products at low prices in just the same way as the satellites of the capitalist blocs are forced to supply them with raw materials at low prices." So when Archbishop Camara talks about violence and non-violence he does so from an independent position, however disturbing that may be for those who hold power and who have long, unhappily, had reason to think that the Church is in the world to support the way things are rather than the more just way that they might be.

That was a point which Archbishop Camara also made in the Munich lecture and many times elsewhere.

"Christians of the extreme right are curiously blind when, fearlessly and unquestioningly, they help to maintain the existing social order with all its injustices and yet are alarmed and scandalised when they see other Christians who feel in conscience that they must denounce these injustices and help every effort to teach the oppressed how to free themselves from their chains."

We are accustomed to think of violence as something that others do or threaten to do to us. We think of the violence of the terrorist, of the robber, of the guerrilla, of the organised national army perhaps, which attacks us in some physical way. In a short but excellent book, first published in English in 1971, and called 'Spiral of Violence', Archbishop Camara looks at violence rather differently. He distinguishes between what he calls Violence number one, Violence number two and Violence number three. Violence number one is the sort we in rich countries do not usually even notice. We call it now *structural violence*: the creation of a system, often economic, which keeps people deprived, without human dignity, without human rights. It can vary in the level of its oppression. By world standards the discrimination that was practised for nearly fifty years in Northern Ireland against a minority was comparatively mild, but it is an example close to home.

In world terms the deprivations are far more glaring. Perhaps the gross inequalities are most obvious between

the rich and the poor in developing countries but often we forget that by investment and price arrangement it is we who, in the rich West (and East), keep the system of inequality going. So Violence number one is the most dangerous though least noticed. That is why, in a speech in 1975 at St Martin in the Fields in London, the Archbishop called for a war on injustice. "The war on injustices should be compulsory for any private or official programme of aid to under-developed countries, in order to avoid the risk of dodging real issues such as the injustices brought about by international trade policies." The real threat of Violence number one is a constant theme in many of the writings of Archbishop Camara. In the "Spiral of Violence" he wrote: "At the moment the developed world is proud and self-confident with its nuclear bombs and thinks it can afford to laugh at that giant with feet of clay, the under-developed world. But do the masters of the 'H' bomb really grasp the scope and consequences of the poverty bomb?"

Then we come to what he calls Violence number two – the response to Violence number one which often takes the form of bloody counter-violence. This is not the Archbishop's way. He does not sit in judgement on the conscience of others, though he once referred rather scathingly to the "arm-chair guerrillas" of the West who, from comparative security, urge others to take the gun. For him Violence number two is a dead-end literally.

It changes nothing. It introduces no new factor into human history. From one tyranny it usually leads to another. He wrote (in *Revolution through Peace*), "I do not believe in violence. I do not believe in hatred. I do not believe in armed insurrections. They take place too quickly. They change the circumstances of men's lives without giving them time to adapt to the changes. It is useless to dream of reforming socio-economic structures, the outer structure of our lives, as long as there is not a correspondingly deep change in our inner lives."

Violence number three follows inevitably from the others. This is the state violence shown not only in repressive measures, detention without trial and, in many countries, dreadful forms of modern torture, but also in the violence of state against state. State violence sometimes seems to escape our notice yet it, and the preparations for it, are collectively the most expensive item on the shopping list of the human family, costing about as much as the world's expenditure on health and education put together. Worse, with the spread of nuclear weapons and the rise of more and more nation states, it does not even bring security. The risks of world disaster grow daily. Archbishop Camara believes that this spiral of violence must be broken by something he calls non-violence.

THE NON-VIOLENT WAY

Perhaps the best introduction is to use the words of Archbishop Camara himself. "If I joyfully spend the rest of my life, of my powers, of my energies, in demanding justice, but without hatred, without armed violence, through liberating moral pressure, through truth and love, it is because I am convinced that only love is constructive and strong." The non-violence of Camara is like that of Martin Luther King. It has a deeply religious base and owes much to the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi. "Time is working for Gandhi", says Archbishop Camara in 'Spiral of Violence', soon he will be acknowledged as a prophet . . . ultimately man will manage to convince himself of the absurdity of war." Because the non-violence he advocates is profoundly Christian it has an essential element – the love of the enemy or the oppressor. We have to "arouse the social consciousness of the ruling élite as well as that of the masses. Only love can build. Hate and violence only destroy."

There are three points at which the Archbishop urges us to break the spiral of violence. The first is in connection with Violence number one, structural violence. He has little time for a Christianity of personal conversion which does not relate to the real problems of this world. The Church, by a programme of education, can make the facts of structural violence better known. To do this will

certainly incur the displeasure of the powerful. Christians can be active in forming the policies of companies and of governments. The Church can campaign for justice in the areas where it still has great influence, especially in Africa and Latin America. This has to be done honestly and perseveringly with a desire not to destroy the oppressors but to win them over to see the truth of the situation and how they can restore justice. It sounds idealistic but it has been known to work.

It is part of our British vanity to think that Gandhi's non-violent campaign for Indian independence only succeeded because the British behaved well. Perhaps, in so far as the British behaved well, it was because of the true non-violence and respect for the opponent that Gandhi showed them. The question of perseverance is vitally important. Bullets work quickly but what do they achieve? It was Gandhi who said: "The power at the disposal of a non-violent person is always greater than he would have if he were violent. There is no such thing as defeat in non-violence."

So if non-violence has its role in over-coming Violence number one so also has it in Violence number two. Martin Luther King, through his work to achieve civil rights for black Americans, is perhaps the best known among many who have responded not with bullets but with a determination to change the situation without destruction. Large groups of people had to be trained and

organised. It took planning; it meant boycotts, marches, sit-ins, and long hours of negotiation with the authorities. It demanded a willingness to turn the other cheek to beatings and insults; in the end, as we know it demanded life itself of Martin Luther King. But it worked.

So also did the non-violence of another determined Christian, Cesar Chavez, President of the United Farm Workers, who fasted and endured imprisonment to awaken the consciences of the Californian land-owners and thus secure just wages and conditions for the migrant fruit pickers who worked in their fields. "I am convinced," said he, "that the truest act of courage is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice." There is today such heavy prejudice in favour of violence as a method of settling conflict that we have always to remember that non-violence is in fact not the exception, but the normal way we come to terms in a dispute in our family, club, factory, local authority, or nation.

The prejudice in favour of violence is nowhere more evident than in the disputes between states which demand such absolute rights for themselves. The Christian, in this area of Violence number three, has to be quite sure what he or she owes to the nation state. In an excellent report of 1973 issued by the United Reformed Church, entitled 'Non-Violent Action - A Christian Appraisal' there appears this sentence: "As Christians our prior

commitment is to the transnational body of Christ, not to the particular nation state in which we happen to be born." If the nation state was less able to call upon our absolute loyalty then Violence number three would hardly be the immediate response that it is in so many circumstances today. We might be more ready to examine the causes of unrest rather than to suppress their symptoms.

In one way today's extreme violence works for good. It obliges the non-pacifist to join the pacifist in looking for non-violent ways of living since the spread of more and more powerful weapons evidently makes the world not safer but more insecure... Now that the Super Powers are capable of killing each others' populations many times over and a reasonably intelligent and skilled terrorist can manufacture simple nuclear weapons, the balance of common sense, of realism, moves over from those who believe in yet more weapons to those who believe in non-violent ways of settling human conflict. Organised non-violent civilian defence becomes the most intelligent answer, even against military invasion.

Those of us who, as Christians, believe that the greatest victory came out of the surrender of One who would not respond to violence with violence have no right to dismiss non-violence as the dream of lunatics. Rather we should at least examine Archbishop Camara's ideas and those of others like him, with sympathetic interest.

The book list at the end will enable you to take his

ideas some steps forward for yourself. It was the American singer Joan Baez who once said: "The only thing that's been a worse flop than the organisation of non-violence has been the organisation of violence".

What the Archbishop from Brazil is trying to do is to give a solid basis to non-violence as a Christian way of life. He needs our help, and especially our prayers.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Dom Helder Camara. *Spiral of Violence*. Sheed and Ward.
 de Brouker. *The Violence of a Peace Maker, Dom Helder Camara*.
 Orbis Books.
- Neville Cheetham. *Helder Camara* (People with a Purpose series).
 SCM.
- Betty Richardson Nute. *Helder Camara's Latin America*. Society
 of Friends.
- General de Bollardiere. *Non-Violence – an effective defence*. Pax
 Christi.
- Ted Dunn. *Alternatives to War and Violence*. Pax Christi.
- John Ferguson. *The Politics of Love*. Fellowship of Reconciliation.
- Edward Guinan. *Peace and Non-Violence*. Paulist Press.
- Martin Luther King. *Strength to Love*. Fontana.
- Ciaran McKeown. *The Price of Peace*. Pax Christi.
- Thomas Merton. *Faith and Non-Violence*. University of Notre
 Dame Press.
- Olsen and Shivers. *Training for Non-Violent Action*. Society of
 Friends.
- Jonathan Power. *Martin Luther King*. Fellowship of Reconciliation.
- Adam Roberts. *Civilian Resistance as National Defence*. Pelican.
- M. K. Gandhi. *An Autobiography*. Housemans.
- United Reformed Church. *Non-Violent Action: A Christian
 Appraisal*. SCM.

Papal Documents:

- CTS S270. *The Pope's Appeal for Peace*.
 Pope Paul's Address to the U.N. General Assembly.
- CTS S264. *Pacem in Terris*.
 Pope John XXIII's Encyclical.
- CTS S273. *Populorum Progressio*.
 Pope Paul VI's Encyclical.

Council and Synod Documents

- CTS Do 363. *The Church in the World of Today*.
 Second Vatican Council.
- CTS Do 491. *Our World and You*.
 1971 Synod document on Justice.
- CTS S316. *This is Right*.
 1975 Working Paper of Vatican *Justice and Peace*
 Commission.