

GANDHI AND KING: SAINTS OF NON-VIOLENCE

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Read chapters from Gier's *The Virtue of Non-Violence: from Gautama to Gandhi* (SUNY Press, 2004) at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/vnv.htm

Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Essential Writings*, p. 17)

I firmly believe that the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolent resistance is the only logical and moral approach to the solution of the race problem in the United States.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (Letter to George Hendrick, Feb. 7, 1957)

True peace is not merely the absence of tension;
it is the presence of justice and brotherhood.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Essential Writings*, p. 51)

The Greatest Indian since Buddha and the Greatest American?

In a 1921 sermon Unitarian minister John H. Holmes declared that not only was Mohandas K. Gandhi (little known at that time) the greatest living human being, but that he was also “the greatest Indian since Gautama Buddha and the greatest man since Jesus Christ.”

Do I dare propose that Martin Luther King, Jr. was the greatest person since Gandhi and, and even more daringly, suggest that he was the greatest American ever? George Washington is usually considered the greatest American, overcoming incredible odds against the British army and successfully leading the nation through its first 8 years.

But what is more commendable: a violent overthrow of colonial rule or liberating former slaves—long denied their full rights—without ever firing a shot? Revolutionary soldiers were certainly brave, but were they as brave as unarmed people facing police dogs in the streets of Southern cities?

An apocryphal story tells of a meeting between Gandhi and Pashun warriors in the Panjab. He had only one question for them: “Who is the most fearless among us? You, armed to the teeth, or me in a loincloth and walking stick?” Abdul Gaffar Khan, the Pashun leader, had to admit that Gandhi was the most fearless, and he went on to form nonviolent army called the “Servants of

God.” Numbering over 80,000 by 1930, this Gandhian army suffered brutal oppression by British and Indian police.

A Successful Union of Politics and Religion?

Both King and Gandhi combined spirituality and political action in a way never experienced before. Previously, religious banners flew at the head of invading armies. Religion was usually used to deny people their rights and it was also used to exclude competing faiths and/or denominations. King and Gandhi were inclusive in their spiritual visions and actions and they brought religious factions together rather than seeking to keep them apart.

Even though they are not mentioned in “I Have a Dream,” nonbelievers could still feel comfortable with a speech with no prayer, only two passages from scripture, and only four references to “God’s children.” (King refers to at least two Gandhian phrases or themes: the power of “soul force” and the redemptive power of suffering.) The only conversions that King and Gandhi sought were people who respected human rights and the dignity of all persons.

The Young King Learns About Gandhi

It was Gandhi the guru of non-violence that came first and then the disciple King. King was first introduced to Gandhi’s ideas by Benjamin E. Mays, president of Atlanta’s Morehouse College, where King matriculated at the age of 15. Mays was one of dozens of African Americans who, during the 1930s, had made the pilgrimage to India to meet with Gandhi and his disciples.

These African-American leaders debated about the feasibility of transferring Gandhi’s methods to America. Some saw a distinct difference between Gandhi fighting for the independence of a great majority against a foreign power and a small minority of African Americans struggling to integrate with a much larger white society. Most of Mays’ colleagues were eventually convinced that Gandhian non-violence could succeed in America, only if African Americans could learn how “to sacrifice for a principle” as the Indians had done.

Mays often talked about Gandhi and his achievements during his all-campus talks on Tuesday mornings. The young Martin, however, was more interested in Henry David Thoreau, and he read and re-read *On Civil Disobedience*. Both Gandhi and King would take Thoreau’s one night in jail against a poll tax far beyond what Thoreau would have had the courage to do.

Some people have called Thoreau an anarchist, and I don’t know enough about him to make that judgment, but King and Gandhi never rejected the authority of the state. King always remained confident that the American government would eventually treat all of its citizens fairly. Both King and Gandhi became revolutionaries for justice, but they never rejected, as anarchists do, the rule of law. Although they of course wanted changes in the laws, they accepted without the protest the penalties imposed on them by judges.

Even after being introduced to Gandhi and Thoreau, the young King still kept to his books and did not engage in any political activities on or off campus. Similarly, Gandhi's early years do not give any hint of a career as an activist. While in London he devoted himself to his law studies, trying hard to become an English gentleman, even to the point of taking ballroom dancing lessons. Like the biblical prophets, the young Gandhi and King were initially very reluctant and unlikely leaders.

It was at Crozer Theological Seminary that King studied Gandhi in depth. In 1950 King heard a sermon on the Mahatma by Howard University president Mordecai Johnson. King wrote that Johnson's message was "so profound and electrifying that I went out and bought a half dozen books on Gandhi's life and works." That was the beginning of his "intellectual odyssey to non-violence." At this time Gandhi's philosophy was only a theory, and the 21-year-old King was not sure how it would combine with his Christian faith or whether it would work to solve the problems his people faced.

The solution finally came to him: "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months" (*Strive Toward Freedom*, p. 97)

Kings' Six Principles of Non-Violent Action

King eventually formulated six principles that he adapted from Gandhi's ethics of nonviolence and his Christian faith. He declared that "they were nothing more and nothing less than Christianity in action" (*Essential Writings*, p. 86).

(1) **Active Nonviolence.** Rejecting criticism that this was a "method of cowardice and stagnant passivity," King described the nonviolent resister this way: "His mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade this opponent that he is wrong. The method is passive physically, but strongly active spirituality" (*Essential Writings*, p. 87).

(2) **Convert the Opponent.** The nonviolent activist does not seek "to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding"(ibid.) It has as its aim the conversion of the opponent to your way of thinking. "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness"(ibid.) It is significant that the British left as friends of a free, democratic India and today Mississippi has the highest number of African-Americans political office holders in the nation, while Alabama has the highest percentage.

(3) **Attack the problem not the person.** The targets are oppressive laws and unjust actions and not the oppressors themselves, because they are the ones you want to convert. This is a version of Christian motto "hate the sin but love the sinner." The battle

is between the forces of justice and those of injustice, not between blacks and whites. And the victory will be for all persons not just the minority.

(4) **The Principle of Self-Suffering.** This is the willingness to accept suffering rather than to inflict it. This is Gandhi's specific discovery but it is an eminently Christian concept as well. King quotes Gandhi on the redemptive power of suffering: "Rivers of blood must flow may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood" (ibid., p. 18).

(5) **No violence of word or thought.** For King the nonviolent resister not only "avoids external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you also refuse to hate him" (ibid., p. 453) The Buddha rejected the Jain idea that karma is produced only by physical acts; instead, he believed, as Christians do, that all sin begins in intentions.

(6) **Self-Sacrificing Love (*agapē*).** King is particularly eloquent about Christian *agapē*: it is "an overflowing love that is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative." It is a love that is not dependent on mutual response of another; *agapē* is an unconditional love that expects nothing in return. The best way to test whether you are capable of *agapē* is to try to love someone you hate.

There is a dramatic scene in the movie *Gandhi*, which apparently has no factual basis, but it nonetheless is a tale that tells truth. It is true that in early September, 1947, Gandhi agreed to end his fast after the warring Muslim and Hindu factions signed a truce, which led to the surrender of their weapons and the halt all hostilities. What the movie shows is a Hindu man who promises Gandhi that he would take a Muslim orphan and raise her as his own and a Muslim man who promises to do the same with a Hindu orphan. This may not be either spontaneous or unmotivated, but it is a creative love that seeks nothing in return.

King and Gandhi as Charismatic Saints

In writing my book on Gandhi I found that the traditional definition of a saint as morally perfect was unsatisfactory. I believe that what all true saints have is charisma. As Phyllis McGivney observes: "The saints differ from us in their exuberance, the excess of our human talents. Moderation is not their secret." The theory of the charismatic saint allows us to canonize both Gandhi and King even though they both had definite moral weaknesses.

It is well known that King committed adultery on a number of occasions. Curiously enough, King's self-control was firm when it came to not seeking prestige and wealth, but it failed regularly with regard to sexual temptation. I believe that we have to be less charitable with regard to Gandhi's use of young women to test his vow of chastity. Even though Gandhi's grandniece Manu was 19 years old, she was described as a very immature and innocent girl. In most legal jurisdictions, King's extramarital affairs were not crimes and were done with consenting partners. As far as we know, Gandhi's experiences with Manu and other young women did not involve sexual intercourse, but they involved an perverse intimacy that crossed the line for even his closest associates.

One could conclude that Gandhi's sexual sins were greater than King's. King admitted that what he had done was a great sin, and he sought repentance. In stark contrast, Gandhi insisted that he had done nothing wrong. Instead he maintained that he was performing a sacrifice for his own and Manu's spiritual purification and for the "full practice of truth." For my article on Gandhi's "right-handed" Tantricism go to www.class.uidaho.edu/gantan.htm.

The Buddha and Christ are clearly our foremost ancient practitioners of nonviolence. (It is significant that Gandhi called the Buddha the "father of non-violence" and not anyone in his own Hindu tradition. See my article "Gandhi and Mahāyāna Buddhism" at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/GB.htm.) Christ's message that we are to love even those who hate us is essentially the message of the Buddha. Both knew very well that hate figuratively burns a hole in the heart.

Equally remarkable, particularly because we know their personal histories and weaknesses so well, are the lives of Gandhi and King. Taking the ancient saints of nonviolence or the more human Gandhi and King as our models, let us all try to develop the virtue of nonviolence until it becomes as natural as taking a breath.

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