

King and Gandhi: Apostles of Nonviolent Resistance to Evil

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 18, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. WC30

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IN 1956, when Martin Luther King Jr. wished to inspire his followers to continue their boycott of the segregated buses of Montgomery, Ala., he would refer to Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance and to Gandhi's successful use of the method of noncooperation with an evil system. Because Dr. King adopted several of these principles and applied this method, he came to be regarded by some as "The American Gandhi." The numerous similarities between them, both in thought and method, have provided an ample basis for this designation. One of their fundamental principles was that people have a moral obligation to resist collective evil. Through many forms of discrimination and exploitation, violence permeated their societies, and they contended that nonviolent demonstrations were necessary to challenge this collective evil of violence. Hostilities, fueled by racism, infected individuals and institutions, and direct actions had to be used to expose these hostilities and to initiate a healing process.

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Demonstrations were structured by Gandhi and King to precipitate crisis situations that would cause the latent racism of opponents to surface and to inflict violence on demonstrators who were willing to suffer. This voluntary suffering was designed to appeal to the consciences of the opponents or to the nation so that legislation might be secured to eradicate some of the injustice.

Gandhi and King urged their demonstrators to strive to achieve agape, that is an understanding, redemptive and creative love for all people. As the love of God operating in the human heart, agape understands that the hateful attitudes of opponents derive from ignorance and fear. Believing that no one is beyond redemption, agape aims to create community.

Unlike friendship, it makes no distinction between worthy and unworthy people, but, with the spirit of forgiveness, seeks to regard every person as sacred. Consequently, demonstrations should be directed not against the people who are conditioned to administer unjust systems, but against the forces of evil at work in these systems. Demonstrators should not make a reference to a victory over opponents — only to a victory for justice and a defeat for injustice.

In endorsing and applying the method of civil disobedience, Gandhi

and King affirmed their commitment to the life of agape, their belief in the sacredness of each person and their reverence for the demands of the moral law. They proclaimed that civil disobedience must be practiced in a nonviolent, loving manner and with a concern not only for obtaining systemic changes but also for transforming the mind and heart of the opponent.

Motivated by a respect for all people, civil disobedience ought to be used to oppose laws that degrade people. Every person ought to owe the highest allegiance not to a civil law, but to the moral law as understood by conscience. If a civil law coincides with the requirements of the moral law, one has a moral obligation to obey this civil law.

But, if it does not, for example a law supporting segregation that in effect rejects the humanity of some individuals by denying them a basic freedom, then one has a moral obligation to disobey this unjust law, which is a form of collective violence. However, in order to demonstrate one's respect for the principle of law, one must also be willing to accept the penalty imposed by law for this disobedience.

Although Gandhi and King shared these principles of nonviolent resistance, there were also some significant differences between them. While Gandhi maintained that a person cannot be truly nonviolent without a be-



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lief in God, he stated that God is the Truth, a force, and the essence of life, but explicitly denied that God is a person.

In sharp contrast, King, a Baptist minister trained in the black Church and in the theistic philosophy of Personalism at the Boston University School of Theology, constantly referred in his sermons, speeches and writings to a personal God who is both transcendent in His being and imminent in His direction of history and the lives of individuals. It was King's belief in this personal God of infinite love, absolute power and justice that was the foundation of his certainty that oppressed people would reach the promised land of freedom and equality.

Apart from Gandhi's commitment to the principles of his strategy of nonviolence, he did not have a philosophical system. Describing himself as a seeker of the truth, he conceded that he had succeeded in grasping only fragments of the truth.

When King completed his graduate studies in the system of personalism, he had definite, reasoned philosophical and theological convictions about the nature of God, human nature, the moral law, the direction of history and the social mission of the Christian Church, and there is no evidence that he altered these convictions.

This is not to deny the fact that his crusades did deepen his understand-

ing of the range and depth of racism, especially in its subtle forms, of the principle that one must confront power with power and of the devastating implications of the spirit of militarism.

As Gandhi moved his people toward political independence, he stressed the necessity of self-help programs. His proposed program of "self-purification" included the development of village industries, the expansion of education with courses on health and hygiene and the introduction of the spinning wheel in every home. King, by contrast, was convinced that the Federal Government could and should do more for blacks and other minorities than they could do for themselves, and therefore he did not frequently emphasize self-help. He concluded that only the Federal Government could provide comprehensive solutions in problem areas such as housing, employment, and education.

In the extensive process of attempting to understand the meaning of King's thought and mission, it is necessary not only to examine his dependence on Gandhi but also to be aware of the differences between them. Only in this way can we begin to do justice to King's strategy of nonviolent resistance, contribute to the perpetuation of his legacy and even develop a new synthesis containing their insights for social change. ■