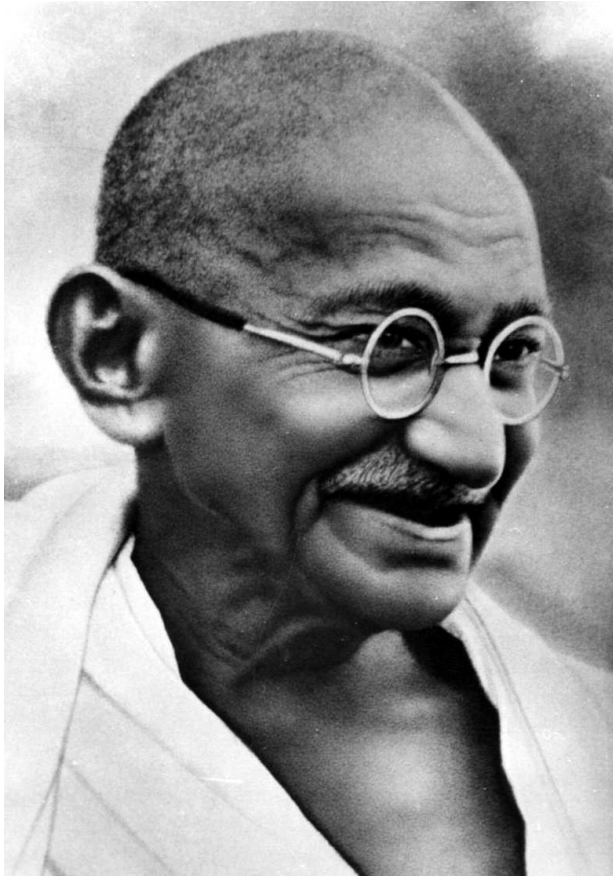


Gandhi, MLK, and Malcolm X

Violence or Nonviolence?

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

(1869 - 1948)



Although Gandhi developed his theory of *satyagraha* (power of nonviolence) primarily as a product of his Hindu beliefs, he was inspired by many of the world's great religions. He found parallels between them all.

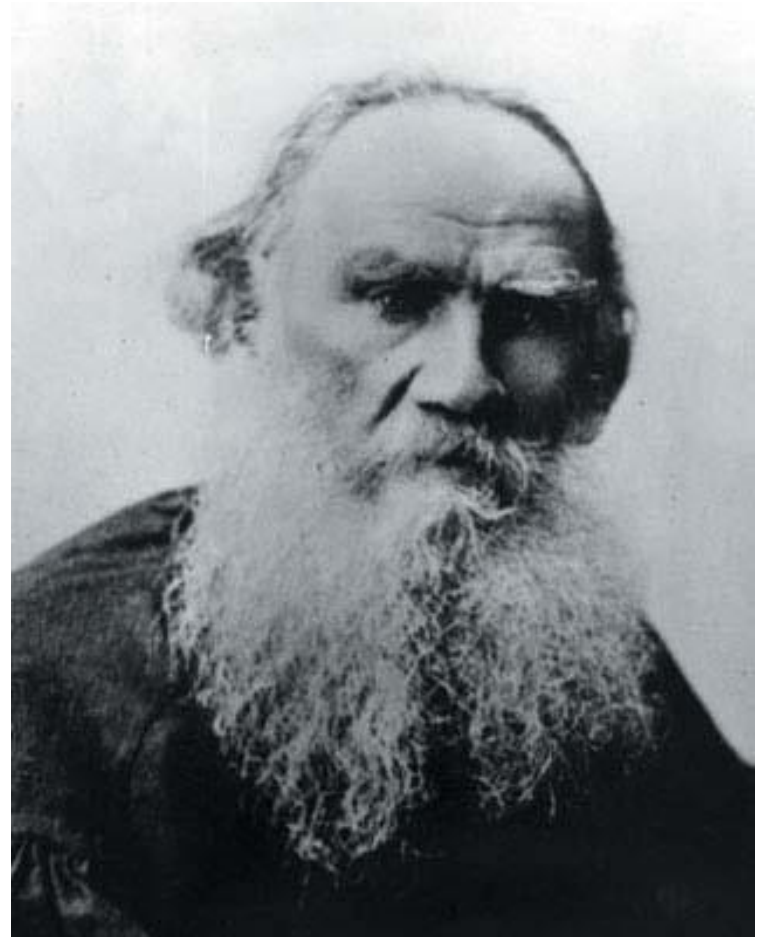
Christianity did have quite an impact on his thought. He was especially drawn to the thought of Leo Tolstoy.

Tolstoy's "Letter to a Hindu"

In his autobiography, Gandhi mentions Tolstoy's work *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Gandhi says this work "overwhelmed" him.

He begins his preface to Tolstoy's letter with a description of Tolstoy, his life as a nobleman, as a valiant soldier, and as a great European writer (if not the greatest). After many life experiences and studies, Tolstoy concluded that political policies generally followed around the world are quite wrong.

What is the main reason for this?



Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)

Tolstoy's "Letter to a Hindu"

Tolstoy teaches that vengefulness is a habit unworthy of us and contrary to the tenets of all religions. To return injury does both harm to ourselves and to our enemies (sounds like Socrates from the *Crito* dialogue).

According to Tolstoy, we should not retaliate but reward the enemy with love instead. It is not that those who suffer should seek no redress, but we invite suffering through our own fault. We make all the oppressor's efforts in vain if we refuse to submit to his tyranny.

Tolstoy's "Letter to a Hindu"

Generally, no one will kick me for the mere fun of it. There must be some deeper reason for his doing so. He will kick me to bend me to his will if I have been opposing him. If, in spite of the kicks, I refuse to carry out his orders, he will stop kicking me. It would make no difference to me whether he did so or not. What matters to me is the fact that his order is unjust. Slavery consists in submitting to an unjust order, not in suffering ourselves to be kicked. Real courage and humanity consist in not returning a kick for a kick. This is the core of Tolstoy's teaching...(pg.38)

Those who have not felt the joy of *satyagraha* will not find interest in Tolstoy's letter, says Gandhi, but such persons should pause and reflect.

"We are our own slaves." - Tolstoy

Tolstoy's "Letter to a Hindu"

Gandhi struggled for the freedom of the Indian people against British rule. He acknowledged that "there are as many views as there are men on how this can be brought about." Tolstoy provides one simple solution. Gandhi insists that, while Tolstoy's letter addresses Hindus and quotes Hindu scripture, such thoughts are to be found in all religions. He acknowledges that practices and dogmas may differ, but the underlying ethical principles are the same.

Tolstoy, who was once a soldier, knows what violence is and what it can do. We must "meet hatred expressed in violence by love expressed in self-suffering." Don't resist evil, says Gandhi, but also do not participate in it (by using force or violence).

On Ahimsa (Non-Injury)

"A man who practices ahimsa in its fullness has the world at his feet." No harm comes to him, Gandhi insists.

In its negative form, ahimsa means not injuring any living being, whether body or mind.

In its positive form, ahimsa means the largest love (even to our enemies). This active form of ahimsa necessarily includes truth and fearlessness. A man cannot practice ahimsa and be a coward.

In order to be truly non-violent, one cannot even be angry with the one who has injured him; he will not wish him harm; he will not swear at him, not cause him harm; he will wish him well.

Non-violence is complete innocence. It embraces all sub-human life (insects, "beasts").

Non-violence is good will towards all life; it is a perfect state; it is a goal which mankind moves towards naturally (though perhaps unconsciously).

On Ahimsa (Non-Injury)

It is not that innocence makes one "divine", it makes one truly "human". As we are now, Gandhi claims, we are partly beast, partly man in our ignorance and arrogance.

Restraint is obligatory (this is the "law of our being"; it helps us attain our "highest perfection"); retaliation is indulgence.

"Suffering is the badge of the human tribe."

Every failure is a call to push forward and try harder. The power of non-violence is capable of melting the "hardest fibre" in "the fire of love." When the British, or any other oppressor, does not respond, then according to Gandhi the "fire" is not strong enough.

Non-violence must be "of the truthful"; we must "truly not intend harm" (even in our thoughts).

A pledge of non-violence excludes any possibility of future retaliation. We must conduct a progressively peaceful revolution.

On Ahimsa (Non-Injury)

Swaraj by non-violence must be a progressively peaceful revolution such that the transference of power from a close corporation to the people's representatives will be as natural as the dropping of a fully ripe fruit from a well-nurtured tree. I say again that such a thing may be quite impossible of attainment. But I know that nothing less is the implication of non-violence. And if the present workers do not believe in the probability of achieving such comparatively non-violent atmosphere, they should drop the non-violent program and frame another which is wholly different in character. If we approach our program with the mental reservation that, after all, we shall wrest the power from the British by force of arms, then we are untrue to our profession of non-violence. (pg. 42)

So such a revolution, Gandhi admits, may be impossible, but this is the standard we have set up. (What would the Existentialists say about this?) Gandhi, himself, was unwilling to take part in a bloody revolution.

The Truth of Non-Violence

Gandhi claims that any attempts to use ourselves for violent purposes will fail...this, he says, is "my truth." He will use no weapon other than the "weapon" of non-violence.

Gandhi mentions the Bolshevik Revolution, and says that he honestly doesn't know much about Bolshevism, but so long as it (1) is based on violence, and (2) is a denial of God, he rejects it.

He admires worthy motives, yet condemns violent methods. Good, he insists, can never be the outcome of untruth and violence (it is interesting to note that he connects non-violence with truth and violence with untruth).

On pg. 43, Gandhi responds to a question put forth by one of his followers: "Can a few be spared in order to save many?"

No principle is worthy of the name "principle", according to Gandhi, if it is not wholly good, and he insists that only non-violence is worth of this.

The Truth of Non-Violence

Any good that violence can achieve, he says, is only temporary, yet the evil is permanent. (Is he right about this?)

"The English will be powerless to do evil if we will do but good." (pg. 44)

Once we realize the truth of non-violence:

1. Peace of mind increases in spite of suffering.
 2. We become braver/more enterprising.
 3. We understand more clearly the difference between what is everlasting and what is not.
 4. We learn to distinguish between what is our duty and what is not.
- Ahimsa and Truth are inseparable for Gandhi.

The Truth of Non-Violence

In the latter part of the reading, there is a passage where Gandhi is reacting to the news that several of his followers have been arrested for civil disobedience. This news fills him with joy? Why?

"Victory is complete if non-violence reigns supreme in spite of the arrests." (pg. 45) But on the other hand, defeat is certain if violence occurs. we must go to prison, he says, without feeling angry or injured and must not quarrel with the conditions of "our own creating."

It is a job of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, Gandhi asserts, to show Christians and Jews that they are all kinsmen. They all believe in God and his righteousness. Remaining non-violent yet strong may at times require imprisonment. "No power of the earth can stop the onward march of a peaceful, determined, and godly people." (pg. 46)

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 - 1968)

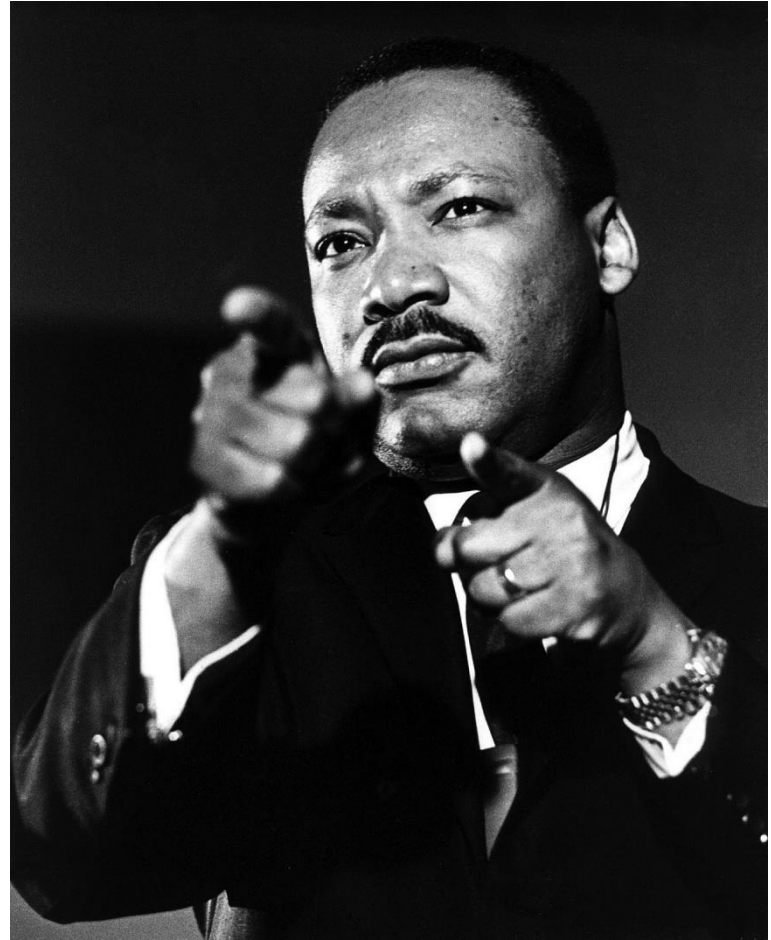
Our reading is a selection from King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail".

King coupled Christianity with Gandhi's thinking on non-violent resistance. He advocates **civil disobedience** of discriminatory laws to combat racism and gain rights for African-Americans.

Non-violent actions draw attention to the injustice of the law which they resist. They create tension in the community, forcing the oppressors to negotiate.

But protesters must be willing to endure all that non-violence entails.

This letter that King writes is an answer to the charge that his methods are "unwise and untimely."



The Non-Violent Campaign

According to King, there are four basic steps in any non-violent campaign:

- 1.collection of facts to determine injustice
- 2.negotiation
- 3.self-purification
- 4.direct action

All of these steps, he claims, have been made in Birmingham, yet "racial injustice engulfs this community." (pg. 342)

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality...On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation...we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise...Like so many experiences of the past we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?" (pg.343)

The Non-Violent Campaign

But why direct action? Why not stick to negotiations?

But negotiation, says King, is the purpose of direct action. Non-violence, he claims, creates such a crisis and establishes "creative tension" that a community is forced to confront what it has previously ignored. King preaches against violent tension, but this kind of constructive, non-violent tension is necessary for growth.

“Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation...Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue...”

The Non-Violent Campaign

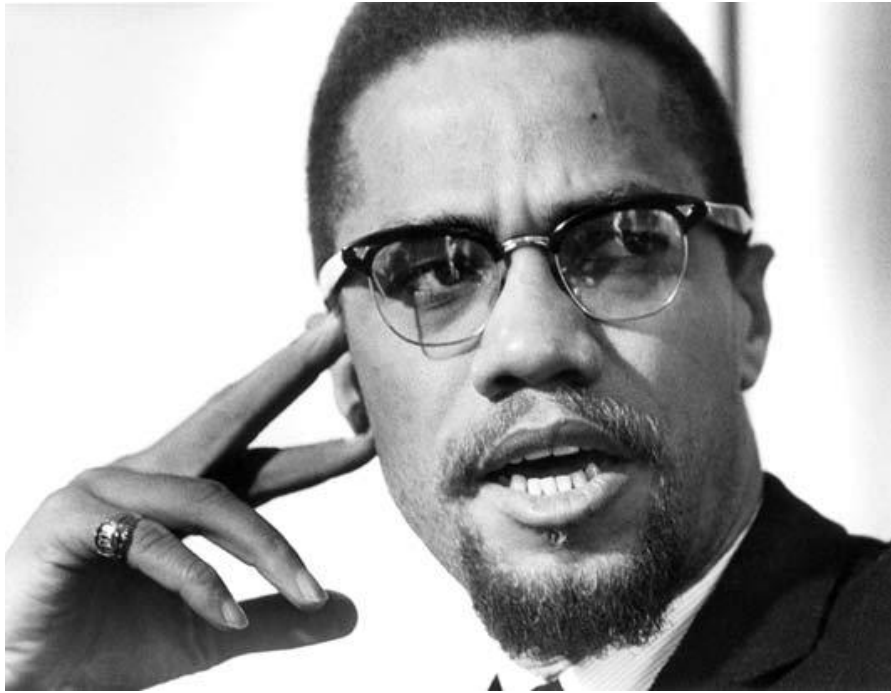
But what about the other charge, that these acts are "untimely"?

Experience shows us, King insists, that freedom is never voluntarily given by an oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. The fight for freedom is never "well-timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from segregation.

This "Wait!" rings in the ears of the oppressed as a "Never!"
"Justice too long delayed is justice denied!"

If one could understand the experience of the oppressed, one would understand their legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Malcolm X (1925 - 1965)



Our Malcolm X reading begins with an excerpt from his *By Any Means Necessary*.

X rejected Christianity and saw it as a tool of oppression. He first turned to Black Nationalism, but later embraced a more tolerant form of Islam.

He advocated that African-Americans turn to violence, but only for self-defense.

Selections from Malcolm X's "Autobiography"

X develops a more tolerant view of Islam through his journey to Mecca.

Islam, he claims, erases from its society the race problem--even whites have the "white attitude" removed from their minds.

They called X angry--so be it, he says. X has also been called a teacher of violence--he claims that this is a lie. He is not for wanton violence, he is for justice.

I feel that if white people were attacked by Negroes--if the forces of law prove unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those whites from those Negroes--then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those Negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law fails to protect Negroes from whites' attack, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves. (pg. 347)

Selections from Malcolm X's "Autobiography"

It is a crime for anyone who is being brutalized, X insists, to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend themselves (again, this seems to be at odds with some of Gandhi's and King's teachings). So fight racism "by any means necessary."

X is for violence if non-violence means postponing a solution to the problem just to avoid violence. A delayed solution is a non-solution. (Is he right about this?)