

Martin Luther King: The American Gandhi

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Abstract

This article originally explores the philosophical background of Martin Luther King, Jr's conception of nonviolence. In particular, it focuses on the role of the theory of love for the development of his thought. It takes into account the role of King's religious education, and establishes theoretical links to Gandhi's own philosophy and action.

Martin Luther King, Jr is without doubt the greatest American figure of the twentieth century. A Baptist priest of vast intellectual depth and complexity, King was also a systematic political thinker. His thoughts on nonviolence and his struggle against segregation and inequalities in the US influenced several generations of nonviolent thinkers and activists. Upon his assassination on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr was hailed by *The New York Times* as “the leader of millions in nonviolent drive for social justice”.¹ As such, many around the world continue to consider King as the American Gandhi who through his method of nonviolent direct action succeeded in arousing the American nation to the evils of racism and poverty and preparing the enactment of historic civil rights legislation. Were it not for King's creative strategy of nonviolent action, Barack Obama would not have been the first black president of the United States. In this sense, Martin Luther King's dream of total interrelatedness and his vision of the Beloved Community have fueled the concept of the American Dream in the past 50 years. Therefore, King called the attention of his native land and the world to the ways our everyday existence was dependent on the social creation of what he called a “world house” when he wrote:

This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together – Black and White, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, cultures and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. (1967c: 167)

This historical breakthrough, formulated by King's social and political strategies, was the outcome of a long period of philosophical incubation that constituted King's intellectual evolution. King was influenced by a variety of authors such as Walter Rauschenbusch, George Davis, L. Harold De Wolf, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, but also he adopted the Gandhian principle

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of nonviolence. As such, he had not only a sound understanding of Christian thought, but also an acute awareness of Western philosophy. King was deeply influenced by his childhood upbringing in African-American religious life, but his training years at the Morehouse College followed by his graduate studies at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University had a deep impact on his radical way of thinking. King traced his intellectual incubation in the following terms: "Not until I entered Crozer Theological Seminary in 1948, however, did I begin a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil" (1986: 37). After reading Nietzsche, Rousseau, and Hegel, King studied the thought of Gandhi. He observed:

The intellectual and moral satisfaction that I failed to gain from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin, the social contract theory of Hobbes, the "back to nature" optimism of Rousseau, and the superman philosophy of Nietzsche, I found in the non-violent resistance philosophy of Gandhi. (1958: 97)

Of course, Martin Luther King did not strictly deduce his doctrine of nonviolence from reading Gandhi directly, but also from his own metaphysical and theological explorations and his intellectual confrontations with philosophical ideas of God. King's analysis of human relations and of the complexity of human collectivities was mainly influenced by his personalist principle of respect for the inherent moral worth of every individual. He described personalism as "the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality." As such, King came to regard nonviolence as an intrinsic deduction from the principle of "personality." One has to look at his innumerable references to the idea of "personal God" and to "the sacredness of human personality" to understand the theoretical and practical connections between nonviolence and personalism in King's thoughts and actions. He explains this influence in these words:

More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. (1981: 153)

In one form or another, King's testimony to personalism and his advocacy for the dignity of human personality provided him with a metaphysical grounding for his understanding of "human goodness" and his break with orthodox theology and dogmatic religion. Confronting the racial dilemma in America, he read intensively into the Gandhian philosophy as a new and powerful weapon against injustice. Assessing the importance of the Montgomery struggle, he asserted:

We had hoped to see demonstrated a method that would enable us to continue our struggle while coping with the violence it aroused. Now we see the answer: face violence if necessary, but refuse to return violence. If we respect those who oppose us, they may achieve a new understanding of the human relations involved. (1986: 77)

King dedicated himself to the Gandhian principles of nonviolence as a principle of action. He recognized Mahatma Gandhi's legacy of nonviolence for the effectiveness of his own campaigns in areas such as integration and voting rights. He traveled to India and read Gandhi's writings extensively. He became Gandhi's greatest disciple, by embracing Gandhi's *Satyagraha* as a method of struggle for the emancipation of blacks in America. As such, he indirectly responded to the visionary message of Gandhi who affirmed: "If it comes true, it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world" (Gandhi 1999: 237–238).

In his Socratic manner, King is aware of the need for “nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism.” (1964: 79f). His philosophical and theological trainings also taught him that every human life was worth something. This was for King the ethical foundation of democracy. He repudiated the materialistic view of human beings and as a result did not subordinate moral values to the abstract laws of property or the state. He believed: “A life is sacred. Property is intended to serve life and no matter how much we surround it with rights and respect, it has no personal being” (1967b: 56). King goes on to add that since human beings are sacred, they should not be dealt with as instruments of economic welfare and political power. This led him to call for a “revolution of values.” According to King, “For the evils of racism, poverty, and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born” (1964: 133). This is why in 1967 King’s moral vision of the American democracy shifted to a more radical rhetoric. Resting on his initiatives against the Vietnam War and economic injustice, King started speaking of a need for a nonviolent revolution in America in the same way as Gandhi had talked about a needed Constructive Program in India. King’s anthropological optimism provided him with a solid trust in the place of justice in history. In a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in April 1967 he asserted: “I have not lost faith, I am not in despair because I know that there is a moral order. I have not lost faith because the arch of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice” (1967a: 17). That precise formulation was new to King. However, he had spoken forcefully in the past on bringing about an end to inequality and injustice in the American society in particular and in the world in general. King’s insistence on God’s justice is the important connection between striving for Christian love and establishing the Gandhian strategy of nonviolence. Accordingly, King’s wedding of Agape love and Gandhian nonviolence in both theory and practice is virtually an original point of view in the development of the American political thought. Therefore, it is not a surprise that King’s struggle against segregation in American society comes hand in hand with an emphasis on non-sentimental or erotic forms of love. On the contrary, King describes the concept of “love” in a spiritual and neighborly manner. To King love is

that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John: Let us love one another: for love is of God.²

In King’s view to restore the broken community in America we need to replace the love of power by the power of love. This is founded upon the conviction that Agape love is: “understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill toward all men. Agape is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart” (1967c: 73).

In other words, King’s ultimate optimism on human nature is based on the conclusion that the validity of nonviolence was based on the Christian concept of “Agape” as the only moral absolute. He also believed in the redemptive possibility of nonviolence in human history and underlined the fact that nonviolent resistance to evil and injustice would produce reconciliation and the Beloved Community. He often described his mission as the pursuit of the Beloved Community. “But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform oppressors into friends” (1986: 141). In this sense, King’s spiritual understanding of the concept of community stands in contrast to an individualistic vision of community which is associated with the social and economic evolution of modernity. His use of concepts like solidarity, empathy, and affection as the basis for the Beloved Community takes on greater significance when considered in the context of a radical

transformation of human connectedness and self-organization of the society. In other words, King infuses the concept of Agape love in that of interrelated life.

In 1958, King writes:

Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it ... It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community. (1986: 20)

By relating Agape to community interrelatedness, King tries to draw a critical argument against the degrading and inhuman conditions of African Americans in the American society. But more generally, he taps into the idea of the brotherhood of mankind against the indifference and oblivious attitude of Western nations toward all unknown slaves who toil every day for them. King explains:

We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. We do not finish breakfast without being dependent on more than half of the world. When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a Frenchman. The towel is provided by a Turk. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese, or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are beholden to more than half the world. In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. (1967c: 181)

Therefore, King is aware of a form of society that advocates and focuses on the eradication of racism, materialism and militarism. His criticism of capitalism has convinced him that “[t]he profit motive, when it is the sole basis of an economic system, encourages a cutthroat competition and selfish ambition that inspires men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life” (1981: 103). Here King’s prophetic role plays its part, because he turns Gandhi and the Gospel into social tools for a better social, political, and economic order. As such, he considers the Beloved Community as the logical and inevitable outcome of the synthesis of the Gospel of Jesus and the Gandhian strategy of nonviolence. Ultimately, King considered nonviolence not only as a method of persuasion of the opponent, but also as strategy for social and political change. Again, his use of nonviolence as a solidaristic approach to human co-existence appears as the organizing principle of all his thought and actions. He came to understand the struggle for social justice as the immanence of God in history. The commitment to justice and struggle against evil is, therefore, in King’s view, a spiritual act and a moral duty to follow. As a result, King’s vision of a reconciled society is that of an inclusive community with a sense of responsibility. As he explains: “At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is ‘community’ – the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother” (1986: 122). As such, King’s conception of “reconciliation” is best described as total connectedness and a network of reciprocity. The recognition of one’s indebtedness and one’s responsibility to others leads in King’s philosophy to an awareness of the interdependent character of life. “In a real sense,” he says, “all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (1967c: 191). King’s conception of a reconciled society does not appear to have room for an individual good that may be opposed to the common good. In other words, the self cannot truly be ignorant of others within the community. This is mainly based on the fact that mutual recognition and reconciliation embody not only a sense of inclusiveness, but also that of mutual dependence among the members of the community. It is interesting to note that King’s notion of inclusiveness is an intercultural imperative rather than a mono-cultural sense of

belonging. He proclaimed: “All men are interdependent. Every nation is an heir of a vast treasure of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead of all nations have contributed” (1967c: 191). That is to say, King’s vision of the Beloved Community brings together the two themes of emancipation and self-transformation. But King is also very attentive to the Gandhian concept of “suffering” as a nonviolent mode of resistance against oppression and injustice. To him, suffering is more powerful than violence in persuading an opponent of his/her wrongdoing. He writes in his *Trumpet of Conscience*:

I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you ... But be assured that we’ll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory. (1967b: 76–77)

This selfless sacrifice led to King’s ability to take many risks in his struggle for civil rights but also to have a tempered management of his role as the leader of the African American Movement in the 1960s and to think on a more international level about the practical changes in the world. Once again, King’s own account of his philosophy of direct nonviolent action shows us the extent to which he was influenced by Gandhi’s vocabulary and theoretical thinking for thinking about civil disobedience and political responsibility. In the same way as Gandhi, whose teachings and writings were based on self-sacrifice and non-possession as means to attain a universal harmony among human communities, King insists on the “world-wide brotherhood” and an ability “to remain vigilant to face the challenge of change.” According to Gandhi, “Those who have followed out this vow of voluntary poverty to the fullest extent possible ... testify that when you dispossess yourself of everything you have, you really possess all the treasures of the world” (1937: 25). King would passionately bring the Gandhian principle of moral and spiritual self-transformation into conversation with the challenges of the global world by affirming:

The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools ...

We must work passionately and indefatigably to bridge the gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress. One of the great problems of mankind is that we suffer from a poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. (1967c: 181)

In fact it seems that King was able to spotlight his strategic nonviolence against all forms of violence in American society. His moral vision of racial equality which started his movement in the late 1950s expanded to include economic, social, and international dimensions. King’s creative visibility and his crossing the threshold into public life loomed so large over the American collective psyche that to imagine a new social and political change without his spirit is almost unfeasible. Martin Luther King was able to guide America to a more equitable society, because he was able to see its future more clearly than many other Americans. Indeed, he possessed that rare clarity of moral vision that nonviolent struggle – perhaps like no other environment – can nurture. King epitomized this rare gift.

King’s vision of reconciliation and interrelatedness evolved into a global intercultural imperative that could be broadly understood in the realm of world affairs. King presented us with attractive

proposals for thinking the two concepts of “emancipation” and “reconciliation” in postmodern times. Ultimately, for him, the path toward emancipation and reconciliation in a global world embraced the radicality of “fellowship” and “neighborliness” as the window that makes reconciliation possible. By taking Gandhi beyond India, King hoped to achieve a fundamental change in the structures of American society. Accordingly, he saw the African-American nonviolent movement as an effort to revive the perennial dream of American democracy, but he also tried to bring a fresh meaning to it by formulating his own dream as that of equal opportunity and solidarity. As usual, King’s own words show how well he understood this:

We cannot walk alone, and as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: “When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating “For Whites Only.”

We cannot be satisfied so long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream (1992: 103–104).

King thereby laid the foundation for a society and a world where not only the oppressed but also the oppressor is liberated. Assuredly, Martin Luther King Jr flew so high above the ideals and actions of any other man of his generation that he changed the twentieth century and the greater world of ages. King’s shining example and his political legacy of nonviolence and the rejection of all forms of segregation will long remain an inspiration for people around the world.

Translated by Nicole G. Albert

Notes

1. See Obituary by M. Schumach, *The New York Times*, 5 April 1968.
2. Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html

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