

Correspondence

JUDGING GANDHI

To the Editors: Mr. McWilliams's "Under Cover" column entitled "Gandhi's Truth" (April) has caused me some concern. It is indeed troubling that a nation born out of the inspiration of Gandhi's teachings would be racked with such senseless violence: It is obvious that Gandhi's path of nonviolence and appropriate technology has been forsaken by the leaders and many of the people of that nation.

Is this to be taken as proof positive of the impractical nature of Gandhi's approach to political change? It must be remembered that the Congress party of India was not united in its renunciation of the use of force in opposing British rule. This was true during the struggle against Britain and during the time of the formation of the nation-state of India. What is evident is that nonviolent resistance can work in some cases. What is still unknown is the efficacy of mass nonviolent resistance against totalitarian regimes.

The use of violence is argued for on the assumption that aggressive nonviolent resistance to evil is a calculated risk, while the use of violence somehow reduces or eliminates risk. The enslavement of Eastern Europe was the result of the risk taken to oppose with violence the evil of Hitler by allying ourselves with the evil of Stalin. Was the triumph of the Maoists in China after the war a risk we took in opposing the imperialist aggression of Japan? Any path chosen in fighting evil is full of peril and unpredictability. This being the case, it becomes reasonable to give a good deal of weight to the argument of nonviolence with its hope of reconciliation and redemption....

Lewis Archer

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To the Editors: "Gandhi's Truth" was so ill informed and so poorly reasoned that I really must protest. Founded on a misapprehension of Gandhi the man, the piece blunders through a misstatement of his philosophy and winds up drawing conclusions which do a grave disservice to your publication and its readers.

Wilson Carey McWilliams appears to be unaware that Gandhi never saw himself as a politician. In all his actions he demonstrated that he was a true karma yogi; that is, one who seeks God through the path of

selfless service to mankind. Time and again, Gandhi rejected a course of action which was politically expedient in favor of one which was nonviolent. Far from being a "Machiavelli in homespun," as the writer suggests, Gandhi's course of action was dictated not by an attachment to results but by a passion for truth. The writer suggests that Gandhi "failed as a legislator because...he rejected political life." It would be more accurate to say that Gandhi never took up the role of a legislator than to say he failed as one. But the writer is accurate in his assertion that Gandhi rejected politics and those "specific human conditions" of fear, greed, and revenge under which most politicians live. If we blame Gandhi for the partition of India, must we not also blame Christ for the fall of Jerusalem because of his insistence that his kingdom was not of this world? It was not Gandhi who taught "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth....Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In discussing Gandhi's attitude toward the body and toward celibacy, I am afraid the writer betrays the ignorance of one who has not practiced these disciplines. The blessed state of peace which results from yogic practice has long been well known, not only among the saints of India but also among those of the West....

Most fundamentally, the writer misunderstands the nature of nonviolence. Nonviolence is not to be judged as an "effective" or "ineffective" means of attaining political ends. Nonviolence must be practiced, if at all, as an end in itself. It is a law of God, an eternal aspect of truth. Gandhi did not teach nonviolence because it was a politic method of dealing with a "liberal" Raj. Nor did he calculate how many "good" lives would have to be given to avoid taking a "bad" one. Such calculations have no meaning to one who believes in the unity of all life. Gandhi taught and believed that nonviolent action is a good in itself, and as an incidental matter it must prevail because it is in harmony with the Power that governs the universe. If we are to blame Gandhi because the Indian people have behaved as they have in Assam, must we not blame Christ for the countless wars and atrocities perpetrated by Christians?...

In this period of human history when we stand on the brink of what even its proponents call "mutual assured destruction," it is particularly important for us to understand Gandhi's truth. Much of the current demand for an arms freeze and arms negotiation proceeds from a demand for security and a belief that reduced levels of

nuclear arms will produce that security. Ironically, it is this very same passion for security which prevents us from trusting our adversary sufficiently to take meaningful steps toward disarmament. Gandhi did not seek an outward security. Unfortunately, such security has never existed and it will never exist. What Gandhi did teach is faith in the essential goodness of the Creator and of his creation. It is this burning faith, put into actual practice in daily action, which is at the very heart of nonviolence....

Henry Warren Shaeffer

Wilson Carey McWilliams Replies:

Politics is not, as Mr. Shaeffer seems to imagine, a slightly shady quest for power. It involves the effort to discover justice and to do it through rightly constituted public authority. Gandhi may not have been a "politician," but he spent most of his adult life speaking about political things and engaging in specifically political actions aimed at changing the basis, as well as the policies, of civil authority. In response to the British claim that India could not govern herself well, Gandhi contended that nations have a right to rule themselves badly. Perhaps he was correct. Having made that argument, however, Gandhi is accountable for the evils that follow from the liberties of self-government.

Moreover, to ignore Gandhi's tactical skill only diminishes him. Jesus told his disciples, after all, to be as wise as the serpents while being as gentle as the doves. Gandhi's selection of the salt monopoly as an issue on which to confront the British is an example of his brilliant contrivances. In material terms, salt seems a small thing. It was not crucial to the economic or military life of the Indian Empire. Hence, as Gandhi knew, up-to-date, essentially liberal British opinion would not sustain prolonged violence and repression to defend the salt monopoly. It is easy to imagine Englishmen of the time reading their newspapers and muttering "It's only salt, for heaven's sake." Symbolically, however, salt represented to Indians a crucial part of the authority of the Empire; the attack on the monopoly dealt a serious blow to Britain's title to rule.

Despite Gandhi's skill, however, there is at least one respect in which Jesus was his superior. As Mr. Shaeffer reminds us, Jesus said "My kingdom is not of this world," implying that his teaching—although relevant to this world and its politics—is not suited to rule them. Gandhi, by contrast, offered Satyagraha as a teaching for this world, and his doctrines are rightly judged by this world's standards.