

Question no. 2: Principles of Nonviolence

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Abstract

Background of Civil Rights Movement in America and its adoption of nonviolent action. Review the six principles of nonviolence. Discuss the utilization of these principles within the work of Gandhi and Dr. King, noting any differences. Identify other principles employed by Gandhi that are not identified in the work of Dr. King.

Principles of Nonviolence

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America during the years of 1955-1968 was primarily a nonviolent campaign to bring full civil rights and equality to all Americans. The movement had been growing slowly since 1896 when the court case Plessy v. Ferguson upheld "separate but equal" racial segregation. After a long fight the ruling was eventually overturned by Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. Though segregation in the school system had been declared 'unjust' it still existed in every community within transport, restaurants, restrooms, theaters, department stores, drinking fountains etc and under the umbrella of worldwide civil unrest the movement came into its power. Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968), a Baptist Minister was the leader of the movement when it 'took off' following Rosa Parks refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a white man on December 1st 1955. MLK then utilized a nonviolent weapon brought into prominence by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (2 October 1869 – 30 January 1948), and organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott which led to many other victorious nonviolent campaigns.

"We should not forget that, although nonviolent direct action did not originate in America, it found a natural home where it has been a revered tradition to rebel against injustice. This great weapon, which we first tried out in Montgomery during the bus boycott, has been further developed throughout the South over the past decade, until by today it has become instrumental in the greatest mass-action crusade for freedom that has occurred in America since the Revolutionary War". (Washington, 1991, p. 349)

President John F. Kennedy had brought the Civil Rights before Congress in 1963 in a speech on television on 11th June, but at the time of his assassination in November 1963 it was still being debated (1964 Civil Rights Act). MLK eventually led the movement to success with a mass "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" on August 28, 1963. Following the march, which ended in Washington DC with MLK's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the National Voting Rights Act (1965) were eventually passed.

As a religious man MLK was greatly influenced by Gandhi and the Gandhian concept of 'Satyagraha', meaning truth-force or love-force. He saw that "the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom" (Washington, 1991, p. 38). The new weapon of nonviolence that Gandhi successfully won India's independence with was a weapon fabricated of love. MLK saw it as, "a sword that heals" (Washington, 1991, p. 349) and in his speech "I have a dream" he said, "we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force" (American Rhetoric: Martin Luther King Jr... I Have a Dream). Gandhi first employed mass civil disobedience firmly founded upon 'ahimsa' (total non-violence) in South Africa, but his use of it as a political weapon after his return to India in 1915 inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.

Gandhi practiced non-violence and truth in all situations. MLK was also after the 'truth', the true nature of man, and felt Liberalism was too optimistic and neo-orthodoxy was too pessimistic, both constituting only partial truths (Washington, 1991, p. 36). Similar to Gandhi MLK recognized two types of laws, those that were just and those that were unjust. He saw just laws as man-made codes that squared with the moral law of God and uplifted the person. Unjust laws such as segregation were out of harmony with moral laws and degraded the person (Washington, 1991, p. 293). Both Gandhi and MLK could see the power behind nonviolent action, a just weapon that had the ability to bring about positive social change and transform those touched by it, a way of disarming the opponent by exposing their moral defenses (Washington, 1991, p. 334). Unjust laws depended on compliance from citizens to implement the unfair policies, non-cooperation of them was a peaceful method of fighting, a defiant attack without psychological violence. It should not be confused with passive resistance, it was active and provocative. Gandhi showed if it was done right, it would often bring down the rulers and change the rules, "an Army shows weakness against no resistance" (Attenborough, 1982).

Nonviolence follows six main principles which Gandhi and MLK appeared to follow. Principle one advocates “It as a way of life for courageous people” and both leaders stressed it is not an easy way to fight, but it has the power to restore self-respect to those committed to it. Gandhi said “they will have my dead body but not my obedience” (Attenborough, 1982). Principle two states “The beloved community is the framework for the future” and both men saw nonviolence as a way to join, not segregate community. Both felt violence was not the way towards long-term peace, Gandhi said an “eye for an eye just ends up making the whole world blind” (Attenborough, 1982). MLK said “Anyone who feels that war can solve the social problems facing mankind is sleeping through a revolution”, “Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind” (Washington, 1991, pp. 275-276). Integration was the goal for both men, Gandhi said of the British “when they leave, see them off as friends” (Attenborough, 1982) and MLK said “Negro revolution is seeking integration not independence” (Washington, 1991, p. 365). Principle three states, “Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil” and number four asks you to “Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause to achieve the goal”. Gandhi and MLK were very adamant it was unjust policies they fought against and not those enforcing them. Crime against morality was the target, they were not attacking immoral individuals and to do this, both were willing to accept suffering rather than fight back. Though I think Gandhi suffered more, both men were prepared to suffer for their causes and Gandhi and MLK spent a good amount of their time in jail. Gandhi said “I am willing to die but will not kill, fighting hurts, but we can not loose” (Attenborough, 1982) and MLK said “perhaps the suffering, frustration and agonizing moments which I have had to undergo occasionally as a result of my involvement in a difficult struggle have drawn me closer to God” (Washington, 1991, p. 40). Both leaders fought against anger and subjected themselves to self-purification to “avoid internal violence of the spirit and external physical violence”, which is principle five. I feel Gandhi carried this principle further than MLK as he made a conscious choice to live like the poor peasants he fought for saying, “to be one with them, I have to live like them”

(Attenborough, 1982). Gandhi constantly questioned himself to keep himself honest and MLK said “I subject myself to self-purification and to endless self-analysis (Washington, 1991, p. 376) . They also both believed in principle six, “The universe is on the side of justice”. In Richard Attenborough’s film Gandhi speaks of history and says “the way of truth has always won” (Attenborough, 1982) and MLK believes the “universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship (Washington, 1991, p. 40).

Gandhi was not the creator of nonviolent action but it came to him directly from the principles he lived his life by, the concept of nonviolence (ahimsa) and nonresistance has a long history in Indian religious thought. Gandhi is known as the Great Soul and ‘Bapu’ (Father) and is honored in India as the Father of the Nation. Gandhi did not have to learn the principles of non-violence nor struggle to uphold them; they were a natural part of his psyche. MLK studied Gandhi and learned about nonviolence as a successful strategy to fight against oppression, he saw nonviolent resistance as “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method” (Washington, 1991, p. 38). Though I do not know a lot about the admirable and short life of MLK, until he discovered the life and teachings of Gandhi after entering a theological seminary he had “almost despaired of the power of love in solving social problems” (Washington, 1991, p. 38) and it is a concept he formed through time rather than innately and intuitively felt. MLK recognizes some people see nonviolence as just a practical technique and not a way of life and notes; “Now, I accept them both” (Washington, 1991, p. 334), the separation occurring at all to him may have made principle five more of a struggle.

Unlike MLK, Gandhi undertook long fasts as means of both self-purification and social protest. He even fasted for the sins of his people, feeling he had a part in their bad emotions and their wrongful retaliation of others. He felt we are all connected and what affects others, affects us and visa versa. MLK reiterates this connection when he talks about the white freedom being linked to the blacks, “their

destiny is tied up with our destiny (American Rhetoric: Martin Luther King Jr... I Have a Dream) and in his famous letter from the Birmingham City Jail MLK he writes “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (Washington, 1991, p. 290). Though he believes in the connection, he was unable to touch us in the way Gandhi’s personal bravery and suffering did, which had an almost redemptive quality. To starve for someone else’s actions showed a visible effect of our connection to one another. It is the connection that has the power to effect, to change, and the Civil Rights movement was carried, escalated and triumphed because of the personal bravery we were witness to. MLK suffered terribly for his cause, death threats, stabbings, and bombs, and in his last years developed the “conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive” (Washington, 1991, p. 41), but it was the brave parents who sent their black children to the local white school and Rosa Parks refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a white man that carried and escalated the movement so that MLK could guide it to victory using nonviolence.

Gandhi took part in all types of action within a nonviolent social movement, from nonviolent action to constructive programs. He lived his life educating his people in their rights, lobbying for them, leading them in mass civil disobedience and all the time spinning his own cloth. Gandhi says “my life is my message”. One thing that Gandhi oozes of is humility and there was not much sign of it in the writings of MLK. Septima Clark’s depiction of him in the book “Ready from Within” did not capture much either, “I think that there is something among the Kings that makes them feel that they are kings, and you don’t have a right to speak” (Brown, 1986, p. 78). Gandhi said:

“The seeker after Truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after Truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not till then, will he have a glimpse of Truth”.

(Gandhi's Views on Truth)

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