

Combating Extremism

FACT SHEET

REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. FAITH & NONVIOLENT PROTEST: Making Nonviolence the Weapon of Choice

Across faith traditions and sacred texts, we find guidance on how to deal with conflict. But one doctrine stands out—nonviolence—as the method chosen by many of our most effective, faith-driven change-makers. Faithful leaders including Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, and Oscar Romero all used nonviolent protest and/or civil disobedience to empower the oppressed and change societal wrongs. Nonviolence not only appealed to their political values, but also resonated with their deeply held religious beliefs, whether Baptist, Hindu, South African-Anglican or Catholic. And they are not alone. Mention of nonviolence can also be found in the texts and traditions of other faiths. (See Tanenbaum's Reflections on Nonviolence.)

Unfortunately, today's headlines about the use of violent extremism to achieve political agendas are making the most noise—drowning out our faith traditions of nonviolence. Though the history of nonviolence and faith is filled with complexities and controversies, nonviolent protest/civil disobedience, modeled throughout time and across faiths, is still a powerful alternative to terrorism. As such, it is worth considering so that, perhaps, it will one day become the weapon of choice.

Origins of Nonviolent Protest

Although we often associate nonviolence as a political strategy for social change with the Civil Rights Movement and India's fight for independence during the 20th Century, nonviolent tactics existed far before the nonviolent campaigns of modern history. One of the first examples of nonviolent protest dates to the First Century C.E. in ancient Judea:

• When the Roman occupiers of Judea attempted to place pagan images of the emperor and the eagle of Jupiter (a symbol of a Roman god) in the Second Temple of Jerusalem, peaceful Jewish protestors in the city of Caesarea surrounded the governor's house for six days, demanding that the images be removed.¹ Although the governor, Pontius Pilate, threatened to kill the demonstrators, they persisted, stating that death was preferable to breaking the laws of the Torah—i.e. the prohibition against worshipping or making pagan icons.²³ Ultimately, Pontius Pilate capitulated, and he had the imagery removed.⁴

Nonviolent tactics became more mainstream during the 19th and 20th centuries as newspapers and publications amplified the messages of vocal but nonviolent activists. The 19th Century Romantic poet

Percy Shelley, for example, used poetry to highlight nonviolence to the masses, linking it to faith:

• Shelley's poem *The Masque of Anarchy* glorified the deaths of nonviolent protestors at the hands of the British army during the Peterloo Massacre in 1819.⁵ Although that protest was secular, Shelley's poem evoked religious imagery as empowering the protestors, and referencing them as the "heirs of God," who would eventually overthrow their tyrants.⁶ *The Masque of Anarchy* had an enormous impact on future faith-based nonviolent movements. Gandhi, for example, quoted Shelley's poem when he advocated for the Quit India Movement⁷ (his call in August 1942 for the end of British rule, which led to his arrest). In response, Indians across the country carried out nonviolent protests.⁸

Other movements have also adopted nonviolence as a practice for promoting their goals. Some were ultimately successful. Others proved that real risks exist for those committed to nonviolence:

- The Abolitionist movement in the Americas was another example. While not all Abolitionists were
 pacifists, some, such as the American Peace Society and the News England Nonresistance
 Society, advocated for the immediate end of slavery and for protests using nonviolent resistance.9
 Nonviolent protests against slavery were also successful abroad.10
- In 1905, Father Gapon of the Greek Orthodox Church led a peaceful demonstration to halt the Russo-Japanese War. The Russian army, however, opened fire on the demonstrators.¹¹
- In Korea, religious and political leaders joined forces to lead nonviolent demonstrations against the Japanese occupying government in 1919. 12

It was against the backdrop of these movements that Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, and later Martin Luther King Jr., a devout Baptist, would emerge.¹³

Martin Luther King Jr. & Nonviolence in Action

Born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King Jr. was originally named Michael King Jr. After his father attended a Baptist World Alliance conference in Berlin and became inspired by the life of 16th Century Protestant reformer Martin Luther, ¹⁴ King Sr. not only changed his own name but also his son's. But they not only shared a common, chosen name—father and son also shared the pulpit as reverends.

Following in the footsteps of Gandhi

Yet it was a Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired MLK, Jr. on how to implement his faith-based drive for social justice and his decision to fight for Black rights in the U.S. during the 1960s. Opting for Gandhi's nonviolent means, King later explained that Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence was "the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom." ¹⁵

 King first became familiar with Gandhi's work at a sermon delivered by the President of Howard University at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania in 1950.¹⁶ Finding Gandhi's message both "profound and electrifying," King many books on Gandhi's life and teachings. As a result, by the time he was helping to lead the Civil Rights Movement, he was deeply versed in nonviolence.¹⁷

The effect of Gandhi's influence on King cannot be understated. In his autobiography, King explained:

"Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The "turn the other cheek" philosophy and the "love your enemies" philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was.

Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking."¹⁸

King puts Gandhi's philosophy into action

The Montgomery Bus Boycott (see below) was King's first opportunity to put the lessons from Crozer Seminary into practice.

- Montgomery's Black community elected King, then a pastor at Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association.¹⁹ To protest segregated buses (Blacks had to sit in the back), 40,000 Black riders nonviolently joined forces and refused to use the bus service. The resulting Bus Boycott reduced the city's revenue from the bus system by 75%.²⁰
- In response to these nonviolent tactics, white supremacists countered with violence. Following the decision by a Montgomery federal court that laws promoting racial segregation on buses violated the 14th Amendment, snipers started targeting Black riders using the bus. Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan also bombed the houses of several Black leaders, including King, in January 1957. Adhering to their strategy of nonviolence and civil disobedience in the face of these attacks for over a year, King and the Montgomery Improvement Association won an impressive victory when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the segregation of Montgomery and Alabama public bus systems were unconstitutional.²¹

The success of the Bus Boycott thrust Martin Luther King Jr. onto the national stage as one of the foremost leaders in the Civil Rights Movement.²²

Targeting Segregation & Voting Rights

In 1957, alongside several other Civil Rights activists, King founded the Southern Cristian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The organization fought segregation through nonviolence.²³

 The Albany Movement of 1961 was the first campaign waged by the SCLC. Following Gandhi's example, protestors deliberately broke segregation laws by staging sit-ins, mass meetings, and marches.²⁴

- Although the Albany Movement failed to end segregation in the town of Albany, Georgia, King learned many valuable lessons—lessons later put to good use in the Birmingham Campaign of 1963.²⁵ That campaign targeted Birmingham's downtown businesses during their profitable Easter season, directly tackling segregation in local businesses, restaurants, malls, and public spaces.²⁶ The marches and sit-ins rallied 1,000 Black community members, most of whom were students.²⁷
- The Birmingham police responded with violence. Police arrested King, and news reporters covering the protests broadcast across the globe images of police attacking children with water hoses and police dogs. Many condemned King for adopting practices that deliberately broke the law, instead of only using the courts, as a strategy for change. One white clergymen described King and the SCLC as "outside agitators." King responded with his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In it, he referenced how Jesus left his home and used nonviolence to change the world to justify his own involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.²⁸
- The Birmingham Campaign triggered international outrage as the media images revealed the brutal treatment of peaceful protestors and the resulting shutdown of the city's businesses. The effort forced Birmingham's business leaders to the table, and desegregation negotiations began. Then, on May 10, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. and fellow Civil Rights activist Fred Shuttlesworth announced an agreement with the city of Birmingham to desegregate all lunch counters, rest rooms, drinking fountains, and department room fitting rooms.²⁹ The agreement also promised the release of jailed demonstrators and the creation of a "Negro job improvement plan" to tackle Black poverty.³⁰ A biracial committee oversaw the successful implementation of the deal's stipulations.³¹
- Shortly thereafter, white supremacists bombed the SCLC's hotel, the house of King's brother, and Birmingham's Sixteen Street Baptist Church, killing four young Black girls.³²
- One of King's nonviolent tactics was organizing mass marches. He organized the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs to motivate Congress, and to pressure President Kennedy to seek passage of the Civil Rights Act. The march also demanded a \$2 minimum wage, the desegregation of all public schools, and legislation authorizing decent housing for all.³³ All sides denounced the march; President Kennedy thought King's demands were too radical, while Malcom X of the Nation of Islam called the demonstration "the Farce on Washington."³⁴
- King rallied a coalition of various organizations and faiths, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, the Commission on Race Relations of the National Council of Churches and the American Jewish Committee, to go to Washington, D.C. on the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, August 28, 1963.³⁵ It was the largest demonstration ever in D.C.,³⁶ with 200,000 people of varying racial and religious backgrounds peacefully assembled near the Washington Monument and marching to the Lincoln Memorial.³⁷ The turnout yielded twice the number of marchers King had expected.³⁸ At the Memorial, King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed the following year—after President Kennedy's assassination.³⁹
- King, the SCLC and the SNCC began a voting rights campaign across the state of Alabama in 1965, specifically within the town of Selma.⁴⁰ At the time, only two percent of Selma's Black population was registered to vote.⁴¹ King and his allies hoped to pressure the Johnson

administration into passing the Voting Rights Act, which would eliminate the legal and systematic barriers designed to suppress Black voters.⁴² The campaign rallied thousands of Black people, and for several weeks little violence occurred.⁴³

King goes to Selma

- Then, as a response to the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson by an Alabama State Trooper on February 18, 1965,⁴⁴ the Selma to Montgomery Marches began. For the first march on March 7th, fellow Civil Rights activist John Lewis of the SNCC led several hundred demonstrators from Selma toward Montgomery by foot (a 54-mile trek) with the goal of convening in and protesting at Alabama's state capital.⁴⁵ State police brutally stopped the march in an incident now known as "Bloody Sunday." At the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama police and white vigilante groups halted the march, stopping the marchers with excessive violence.⁴⁶
- Undeterred, King called for all clergy and civil rights activists to meet in Selma to march again to Montgomery. State troopers once again stalled their second attempt after 2,000 protestors passed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9, 1965. 47
- The final march on March 17th ultimately reached Montgomery.⁴⁸ It included many leaders from diverse religious traditions: SCLC co-founder Minister Ralph Abernathy, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (introduced to King by Tanenbaum's namesake, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum,⁴⁹ who also marched alongside King in Selma⁵⁰), Greek Orthodox Archbishop Lakovos, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and hundreds of other priests, rabbis and social activists.
- On March 15, 1965, President Johnson called on Congress to create a law protecting the voting rights of minorities.⁵¹ And on August 6th of that year, he signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, empowering Blacks and other racial minorities, especially in the South, with the ability to vote—a right written into the 14th and 15th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution but until then, systematically violated.⁵²

After Selma

- King's religious beliefs led him to consider other issues of his time and in 1965, he denounced the Vietnam War stating, "As a minister of the gospel, I consider war an evil. I must cry out when I see war escalated at any point." ⁵³ To King, the war was evil due to its bloodshed. But it also perpetrated evil by diverting funds that could have gone to social services and alleviating poverty. ⁵⁴
- Ultimately, King's perspective was that direct action nonviolence, the strategic use of nonviolent methods such as letter-writing, rallies and strikes to persuade opposing and/or oppressive actors to engage in dialogue to resolve an injustice,⁵⁵ was an effective tool for him to pursue justice as a religious Christian. But this view was not universally applauded and it cost him political support. The NAACP viewed direct action as too radical; in contrast, the SNCC believed that nonviolence was not radical enough.⁵⁶
- Martin Luther King Jr.'s last initiative was his Poor People Campaign in 1967.⁵⁷ More formally described as a campaign for an "Economic Bill of Rights," the initiative's goals included eliminating

slums, continuing Johnson's War on Poverty, and guaranteeing equal opportunity in employment. King envisioned deploying a new nonviolent tactic: building a slum named "Resurrection City" to disrupt life in D.C. and highlight the reality of poverty that was present across America. This was not to happen during King's lifetime. Instead, the SCLC led the building of Resurrection City on the Mall in Washington D.C on May 13, 1968—after King's assassination.⁵⁸

- King arrived in Memphis on April 3, 1968, to support a sanitation strike in the city as part of the Poor People Campaign.⁵⁹ King believed that a workers victory in Memphis was necessary for the Poor People Campaign to succeed on the national level.⁶⁰ That day, King gave his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech to a crowd of sanitation workers who had braved a storm to hear him speak.⁶¹ In it, King compared the past struggles of Moses, Martin Luther, and Abraham Lincoln to the struggles of oppressed people in the South Africa, Kenya and America of his day, extolling the importance of unity, sacrifice, and the guidance of religious leaders.⁶²
- The following day, April 4, 1968, James Earl Ray assassinated King on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. On April 8, 42,000 people marched silently through Memphis in honor of King. King's wife, Coretta Scott King, led the demonstration to City Hall and pressed the mayor to give in to the strikers' demands.⁶³ On April 16, 1968 City Hall capitulated, both recognizing the sanitation union and guaranteeing a better wage.⁶⁴
- King's faith-based approach to nonviolence made him a controversial figure while alive, but in death he was celebrated as an American hero. In 1983, Ronald Reagan signed a bill creating a U.S. federal holiday in his honor.⁶⁵

King's Legacy

The tradition of faith leaders employing nonviolence to affect historic change has continued. For example, South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu advocated nonviolent protest to help lead South Africans in the fight (and ultimately, triumph in 1994) against their country's 43-year old Apartheid regime. Glder now but still active, Tutu recently raised his voice once more. This time, speaking out against the current persecution of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority.

For Discussion

 Questions for Consideration: A question sheet to use alongside "Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Faith & Nonviolent Protest".

Related Tanenbaum **Combating Extremism** resources:

- Reflections on Nonviolence: A new resource about diverse faith perspectives on nonviolence.
- <u>White Supremacy: An Overview</u>: A comprehensive fact sheet about the varied white supremacist movements and groups.
- A Q&A on the Rohingya Crisis & Buddhist Extremism in Myanmar: A fact sheet that answers the
 questions: Who are the Rohingya? How did the current Crisis start? Who is the Buddhist extremist

group targeting them? And more.

• The Rohingya Origin Story: Two Narratives, One Conflict: A fact sheet explaining why divergent claims among the Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Myanmar about the Rohingya's origin in the region lay at the heart of the conflict.

Question Sheets for Related Resources:

- Questions for Consideration: A question sheet to use alongside "Reflections on Nonviolence."
- Questions for Consideration: A resource to use alongside "White Supremacy: An Overview".
- Questions for Consideration: A question sheet to use alongside "A Q&A on the Rohingya Crisis & Buddhist Extremism in Myanmar."
- Questions for Consideration: A question sheet to use alongside "The Rohingya Origin Story: Two Narratives, One Conflict."

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⁴ Foerster, Gideon. "The Early History of Caesarea." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research. Supplementary Studies*, no. 19 (1975): 9-22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20066615.

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thomas Weber, *Gandhi as Disciple and Mentor*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004,) p. 28.

⁸ History Staff, "Mohandas Gandhi," History, 2010. http://www.history.com/topics/mahatma-gandhi

⁹ Chernus, Ira. American nonviolence: The history of an idea, (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), Ch. 3.

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¹² Shin Yong-ha, "Why Did Mao, Nehru and Tagore Applaud the March First Movement?" *Korea Focus*, 9/01/2010, http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design2/layout/content_print.asp?group_id=102423.

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¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, 1998. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr-contents/chapter-3-crozer-seminary

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²⁰ Ibid.

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- ⁴⁰ The King Institute Staff, "Selma to Montgomery March," King Encyclopedia, (The King Institute-Stanford University.)
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- ⁵⁰ Georgette F. Bennett, the widow of Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, shared via email exchange on December 29, 2017 that Rabbi Tanenbaum also gave King Jr. one of his first national platforms at the First National Conference on Religion and Race. The conference "brought together representatives of U.S. Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant organizations to discuss America's racial problems, and was hailed by Martin Luther King as "the most significant and historic [convention] ever held for attacking racial injustice' (Pieza, "Rev. King Urges Boycott"). King gave one of the major speeches at the four-day event, convened to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and subtitled, "A Challenge to Justice and Love." The King Institute, Stanford University, "National Conference on Religion and Race,"
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