

# The Influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement

As a Baptist minister, Martin Luther King derived much of his philosophy of opposing evil nonviolently from the Bible, from his understanding of the teachings of Jesus, and from certain pacifist threads in the Christian tradition. However, King was also greatly influenced by certain non-Christian ideas. Perhaps most important of these was the philosophy of nonviolence practiced by Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi, the spiritual leader of India's independence movement in the first half of the 20th century.

Not that Gandhi's philosophy was itself completely non-Christian. Gandhi's nonviolence was informed by not only his Hindu background, but by extensive study of other religious and moral traditions, including Christianity. Foremost among his Christian mentors was Count Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian novelist who late in his life adopted and espoused a radical "back-to-basics" pacifist version of Christianity based on a literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.

Throughout history, there have certainly been many people who refrained from using violence, who refused to participate in war. But the knock on them has always been that while perhaps there's something admirable about that in the abstract, or perhaps that would be the right path to choose in a perfect world, unfortunately in this world there are times that you have to be willing to fight for good and fight against evil. Pacifism, it is held, means choosing to be ineffectual, choosing to sit out even the righteous fights. Most good people have felt it necessary to find a balance between being too violent and warlike versus being too passive and defenseless.

Gandhi's greatest contribution to history, and the reason his was such a crucial influence on King, was to call into question this seeming truism that being nonviolent means being passive. He spent virtually his entire adult life experimenting with methods of nonviolence intended to be not just morally admirable, but effective in the real world. His contention was always that standing up for oneself, struggling against injustice, prevailing over evil, living with dignity and integrity, etc. do not require the willingness to use violence. There are other ways, other strategies one can use.

King was convinced from an early age that there are some things in the world that are simply morally unacceptable. The extreme racial oppression of Black Americans that he experienced was one obvious example, but certainly poverty and war and many other issues were important to him. In his view, these had to be opposed, had to be combated with all the strength, intelligence, and courage one could muster.

Yet at the same time, King's commitment to Christian principles meant he felt obligated to love even his enemies, to wish ill to know one, certainly to seek to kill no one.

It was a dilemma, the same dilemma that people of conscience have always faced. He wanted to fight for truth and justice, but he didn't want to hate and kill.

His discovery of Gandhi offered him a way out of the dilemma. It showed him that it would be possible to fight for the civil rights of Black people not with guns and bombs or with lies and propaganda, but with love and truth. Under his leadership, the Civil Rights Movement was nonviolent without being passive.

King had of course heard of Gandhi—a major player on the world scene—from early in his life, but he did not

take notice of him in a deeper way until his time at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, which he attended from 1948 to 1951. In a presentation he prepared for a class entitled "Christian Theology for Today," he included Gandhi as one of a number of figures he identified as "individuals who greatly reveal the working of the Spirit of God."

He was especially inspired to learn about Gandhi after attending a talk by the president of Howard University Dr. Mordecai Johnson in 1950. Johnson had just returned from a visit to India and had much to say about Gandhian nonviolent direct action. King responded by buying a number of books on Gandhi and immersing himself in the task of understanding all he could about the Indian leader and his philosophy.

What he discovered excited him greatly. "As I read, I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform."

King had believed that "The 'turn-the-other-cheek' philosophy and the 'love-your-enemies' philosophy were only valid 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."

Thus it was that starting in 1955 when King became actively involved in planning and implementing strategies to fight against the crippling racial discrimination practiced in America at the time, he chose exclusively Gandhian methods of nonviolent direct action.

Over the years, King was further influenced by other key figures in the civil rights movement who were admirers of Gandhi and proponents of nonviolence, such as Bayard Rustin.

In 1959 King was to follow in the footsteps of Johnson and make his own pilgrimage to India. There he met with members of Gandhi's family, and with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who for decades had been a key ally of Gandhi in the struggle for Indian independence.

One of those who worked with King in the Civil Rights Movement was Andrew Young. When asked about the 1959 visit to India, he remarked: "Dr. King talked about this trip all the time, and he talked about the influence that Gandhi had on his life. He learned the meaning of the heritage that he had grown up in, and he talked about that. In fact, our whole civil rights movement-the March on Washington-was a reflection and effort on our part to imitate Gandhi's Salt March to the sea. Our teachings, the methods that we used all came from the life and the spirit of Mohandas Gandhi."

Had Gandhi never lived, perhaps King would have still become a key leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and perhaps he would have worked out some other way to embrace Christian love and peace and yet still be able to stand up against evil and injustice. But it's a safe assumption that both King and the Movement would have been very different without the influence of the Indian spiritual leader.

Sources: Placido P. D'Souza, "[Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr.-Gandhi's Influence on King.](#)" SFGate.

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