

# Non-violence

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



With the simultaneous proliferation of technology and global-political danger in the modern world, strategies for countering both political oppression, and the outbreak of political violence and war are urgently needed. Although the century which has recently slipped away -- the Twentieth Century -- may be remembered as " the bloodiest in history" (Martin 625), with hundreds of millions of people killed in wars and with weapons of mass destruction being " invented, built, deployed and further refined" (Martin 625) during the same century when state-sponsored genocide and terrorism became commonly known quantities.

Against this backdrop of chaos, war, and an increasingly dangerous technological landscape, the philosophy of non-violence, or passive resistance, gained an historical currency which is still unmatched. The activities of important leaders like Gandhi, King, and Mandela revealed the truly earth-changing, paradigm shifting potential of non-violence resistance as a method for seizing social initiative and political power. Because of the actions of these three important leaders, plus a host of other lesser-known figures, and the action of millions of ordinary activists, " it can be argued that the rise of nonviolent action was one of the most important developments of the century" (Martin 625), and one which has tremendous potential for application in today's difficult and complex political world.

While it is true enough that Gandhi, King, and Mandela over similar models of non-violent leadership and that key tenants of what might be termed a " universal" sense of non-violence pervade each leaders' philosophies, distinct differences are also recognizable when a comparison of the three leaders' ideas, activities, and accomplishments is carried out. Such a study of

similarities and differences in the philosophies and actions of these important leaders is crucial to understanding how the philosophy of non-violence may be applied in modern times as an antidote to the dangerous and oppressive climate that threatens much of the world. As noted, " Nonviolent action -- including methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins -- has become increasingly important in the past century as a method for waging conflict and promoting social change" (Martin 625) and due to the urgent pressure caused by modern political and social challenges such as terrorism, global warming, the protection of human rights and religious freedom, adapting past approaches of non-violent action to present-day challenges may be beneficial.

Non-violent activism may, in fact, help bring about important social changes: " Some areas for future expansion of the role of nonviolent action include replacing military defence, technological design, challenging capitalism, bureaucratic politics, information struggles and interpersonal behaviour" (Martin 625); the suggestion of non-violence as an all-pervading philosophy applicable throughout the full strata of political and social issues may sound grandiose, but as we will see, this idea is actually a core-concept for the three leaders in our study.

In this regard, non-violent philosophy takes its roots not in social, political or philosophical ideas, but in spiritual convictions or even, spiritual revelation. An abstraction of " nonviolence principles, building on the core dynamic of political jiu-jitsu in contexts where the opponent does not use physical force" (Martin 625) may be the best way to intuitively understand that non-violence does not indicate non-action or total passivity in the face of aggression. Such

a distinction is difficult to pin down, but it is a crucial part of activism, manifest in the breaking of " unjust" laws, and passive resistant behaviors which, if not violent, certainly imply action by the participants.

In order to shed light on some of the more challenging aspects of non-violent activism, such as the spiritual aspect, as well as investigate the potential application of non-violent philosophy in modern times, the following brief examination of non-violent philosophy according to each leader: Gandhi, King, and Mandela, will attempt to sketch a general idea of the similarities and differences of each leader's approach and attempt to discover if any type of universal vision of non-violent philosophy can be discovered.

For Gandhi, non-violence arises out of an organic human impulse or " basic law of our being" (Gandhi, and Merton 23); such a conviction, for Gandhi, is based not in genetic or biological assumptions or evidence or in logistical philosophical reasoning, but in spiritual ideas. For Gandhi, " Ahimsa (non-violence)" (Gandhi, and Merton 23) is the opposite of " himsa (violence)" (Gandhi, and Merton 23), and the attributes of each energy are just as distinct. While Ahimsa " can be used as the most effective principle for social action, since it is in deep accord with the truth of man's nature and corresponds to his innate desire for peace, justice, order, freedom, and personal dignity" (Gandhi, and Merton 23), its opposite energy, himsa, " degrades and corrupts man" (Gandhi, and Merton 23); therefore to bring himsa energy against himsa energy would be to fight fire with fire.

By contrast, the application of ahimsa or non-violent energy to the problem of himsa energy " heals and restores man's nature, while giving him a means to restore social order and justice" (Gandhi, and Merton 23). The important

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thing to remember here is that, for Gandhi, ahimsa and himsa energies are not metaphorical reflections or abstract concepts, they are living, spiritual realities. Although the capacity for ahimsa resides in each person, modern society has left humanity with a much more desperate and disordered reliance on himsa energy. For Gandhi such an alienation of man's true capacities has resulted in a culture where " violence seems to be the very foundation of social order and is " enthroned as if it were an eternal law," so that man is called upon by society to reject love" (Gandhi, and Merton 43) and instead embrace a social reality which is enforced by violence or by the threat of violence.

To meet this himsa-driven society with ahimsa energy and non-violence requires supreme courage on behalf of the activist. This extraordinary courage, according to Gandhi, is derived from God:

This courage demands nothing short of the ability to face death with complete fearlessness and to suffer without retaliation. Such a program is meaningless and impossible, Gandhi thinks, without belief in God.

The implication in Gandhi's ideas is that the activist or the " Satyagrahi" is enabled, in fact: bound, by God to break the laws of man when they are unjust. The decision as to how it is determined that a law is unjust is murky and unclear, as we will see: this same ambiguity marks both King and Mandela's own approach to non-violent activism. The historical truth is that Gandhi made clear that each " Satyagrahi was bound to resist all those laws which he considered to be unjust and which were not of a criminal character, in order to bend the Government to the will of the people" (Gandhi 21) and it

is this kind of "twisting" which comprises the active aspect of non-violent activism.

The expression of non-violent activism by King relied as much on spiritual conviction as that of Gandhi. This conviction brought about a similar adherence to the concept of breaking "unjust" laws as a method of civil disobedience. King, like Gandhi, found justification for the breaking of social laws by the invocation of Divine Power. The result was that King experienced some difficulty in making his racial and social activism truly universal, although such a desire to do so formed an underlying precept of his overall strategy for social and political change. In a rather unique twist of philosophy, King opted to not only resist unjust laws non-violently, but to reach out to his so-called opponents: white racists with language of reconciliation, good-will, and fellowship. King's invocations of "the good to be achieved" (Wolf, and Rosen) were powerful counterparts to his criticisms of the social conditions he sought to transform.

Since King's goal was to "to bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible" (Wolf, and Rosen) his reliance on civil disobedience and the breaking of unjust laws by Divine justification, like Gandhi's, requires a deeper examination. Such revelation is possible due to King's extensive writings; in particular his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" a famous document where he addresses the concern of his fellow clergymen regarding the breaking of laws by civil activists. The letter repeatedly appeals to a shared sense of religion; King also cites Biblical examples to bolster his argument. Responding to the criticism that his actions and the actions of his followers, even though non-violent in practice, ultimately

resulted in violence on the behalf of the white Southerners who beat and jailed the protestor (and sometimes lynched or otherwise killed African Americans), King compared the fight for civil rights with the fight of Jesus to spread the gospel.

King's appeal via religion and spirituality was based in a desire for unity and understanding. While he denied accusations of extremity or of inciting violence, he admitted that the impulse for civil rights was, by his reckoning, the will of God. King advises that the will of all people is toward freedom and equality. " Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro." (King) By forwarding the notion that civil rights are an inevitable outgrowth of both God's will and the flow of history, King is, in effect, offering a justification for his tactics and philosophies regarding civil rights. The justification for the elements of passive resistance which had led to violent confrontation is also based in King's ideas of justice. King's idea is that God's law is the highest law and that man's laws may be broken when they obviously disagree with or even insult God's law.

With the belief that God's Law is the highest law and that history shows that all people will struggle for freedom and liberty, and by appealing to the rational sense of justice and the emotional and spiritual senses of brotherhood and love, King attains justification for his actions but does not seek to evade or subvert laws outright.

Unlike King, Mandela called for deliberate confrontation with the forces of apartheid which apposed his view of liberation and freedom. Although he repeatedly expressed his opinion that he was not, in fact, a racist himself,

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Mandela's rhetoric unlike King and Gandhi's, " was more polarizing" (Wolf, and Rosen); for example, Mandela never attempted " to appeal to whites" and he sought by confrontational rhetoric coupled with non-violent activism to " through greater polarization to galvanize the situation to crisis levels, thereby compelling action by the international community" (Wolf, and Rosen) which in itself presents a divergence in thought from Gandhi and King both of whom sought reconciliation with their enemies.

However, rhetoric was simply another tool in Mandela's non-violent philosophical approach. When, at key moments, he might have called for violence, in actuality, he strove for non-violent change. he might have " easily have called for a violent overthrow of the South African government upon his release after 27 years in prison" (Pierce 1) but rather than do so, he advocated non-violent resistance. The idea of appealing to the world community adds another dimension to the non-violent approach of activism. For Mandela, " In this scenario, " the international community" becomes subrogated to the role of " broader constituency" that Mandela evoked indirectly" (Wolf, and Rosen) but whose support and intervention proved crucial to his success. Because of his sometimes volatile rhetoric, Mandela took special care to " emphasize his desire for reconciliation across the divide of colour" and repeatedly " pledged himself anew to work for a multiracial society in which all would have a secure place" (Pierce 175).

### Contemporary Impact of Non-Violent Strategies

Despite the contributions of great thinkers and activists like those examined in the preceding, brief discussion, the fact is contemporary society seems no less preoccupied with violence than ever before. By examining the media <https://assignbuster.com/non-violence/>



one has the distinct impression that in the world of media and media-related technology, a great deal of concern has been expressed by both everyday observers and specialists in social-psychology over the possible negative impacts that media, and in particular media portrayals of violence, may have upon small children and adolescent children. One of the most complex facets of the issue is the still-unknown impact that new technologies such as 24 hour a day cable programming, widespread Internet access, and the "digital age" in general will have on the generation of young people who are presently the first to be so overwhelmed by such widespread media and media technologies.

An immersive and nearly all-pervading sense of media exists in modern homes that, in fact, the presence of media can be said to form a basis of "reality" for many people. It is this exact kind of blurred distinction between perceived reality (based on media models and information) and reality (those aspects of life which stand apart from media and media-based models). The distinction between media-reality and reality is not always clear, particularly to small children and adolescent children: "The boundaries between reality and unreality are especially permeable for small children. They are unable, through at least the age of three or four, to distinguish fact from fantasy. Even older children rarely manage to keep "real life" and vicarious experience in watertight compartments" (Bok 1999, 38) as we will see in the following discussion.

The main impact repeated viewings of media violence seems to exert over small children and adolescents is the conflation of media-violence with organic psychological processes, many of which exist at such a deep,

primitive psychological level in humans that manipulation of these emotions, and psychological dispositions remains, for the most part, beyond the conscious perception of the viewer. In conclusion, although the idea of media-responsibility regarding the impact of violent programming on children and young adults is often cited by critics as a form of censorship, ample scientific evidence and research exists to establish media-violence as a certain source of negative influence on young people.

The fact of the matter remains despite the right of free speech that media-reality and actual reality are non-distinct at some deep, organic level in human psychology: " weeks earlier the Los Angeles police officers whose roadside beating of motorist Rodney King had been shown on TV screens the world over had been acquitted by an all-white jury[...]In that crisis, the boundaries between movies and reality blurred, not only for the public but also for Hollywood producers, directors, and actors who were seeing smoke rising beneath their hillside residences and hearing sirens echo up and down the canyons," (Bok 1999, 36); with such a confusing and agitating impact of adult professionals, what can we expect when we expose our children to the same cultural ambiguities through media?

If non-violent philosophy according to Gandhi, King, and Mandela is correct then violence is not a norm in human society, but a constructed evil. If, as the proponents of non-violent philosophy suggest, " non-violent settlement of conflict is the human norm as we well know from daily experience. We are not programmed in some genetic way to violence" (Kent) then a radical re-visioning of our self-identity and self-image as human beings must take

place not only in our media and in our educational facilities, but in our individual psyches as well.

The applications of non-violent strategies in contemporary culture can be thought of as being as unknown as the implications of deep-space travel because even though the contributions of such historical leaders as Gandhi, King, and Mandela reveals the tremendous power of non-violent activism, the full impact of the philosophy as articulated by these men has far-reaching cultural, global-political, and spiritual implications which surpass anything which has yet occurred in history. In other words, the "pioneers" of the "modern" incarnation of non-violent strategy which we have examined: Gandhi, King, and Mandela represent not the totality of what the non-violent philosophy can or wants to attain, but the mere beginning of a global transformation which is rooted not only in the basic moral nature of humanity, but in humanity's spiritual destiny and responsibility.

Certainly individual leaders and activists continue to utilize the non-violent approach to attain important results in their areas of influence. Modern technology can also help individual activists to promote change by spreading honest information regarding the repercussions of violence and the militarization of political issues. One recent example is when "a 1991 massacre in the East Timorese capital Dili was recorded on videotape and subsequently broadcast worldwide, this generated enormous support for the resistance" (Martin 625); such applications of technology by individuals represent one small but important aspect of the many avenues of potential non-violent methods of change.

Other methods include educational strategies based in the ideas forwarded by Gandhi, King, and Mandela. The recognition of the historical impact of the immensely influential strategies of non-violent change and civil disobedience will also help to inform and empower individuals who, in turn, may adopt some of the strategies and ideas reflected upon in the above discussion to help bring about social and political change through non-violent means.

### Conclusion

The examination of three important world-leaders who based their activism in non-violent philosophy reveals certain universal traits among the different incarnations of non-violent activism. Among these universal traits is a belief in the breaking of " unjust" laws for the purpose of bringing about social and political change. This belief is often, if not always, accompanied by an ambiguous but firmly articulated that such a braking of laws is based in Divine Will. Another core belief seems to be that non-violence rather than violence is, in fact, more in keeping with humanity's organic nature. This idea often results in a corresponding belief that the violence evident in human society is the result of a kind of perversion of humanity's natural attributes into an unnatural and unhealthy state.

Against this backdrop, it is very difficult if not impossible to envision the philosophies of non-violent activism as we know them today as anything short of a religious and spiritual philosophy with extremely pragmatic roots in social and political activism. Not only is the spiritual aspect of non-violent philosophy seemingly universal in the three historical figures studied in this short discussion, but the attributes of spirituality embraced by non-violent activists are, in themselves, of great and abiding interest to any observer. A

discussion of this aspect alone would probably reveal that the philosophy of non-violence has existed as a spiritual conviction at various times in various cultures throughout the entire history of humanity.

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