

**Gandhi, King & Jesus**  
**Similarities & Differences**  
by  
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**December 8, 2019**

If there is one clear point of agreement between three of history's greatest social reformers, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesus of Nazareth, it is their devotion to nonviolence. Gandhi said, "Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of [humanity]. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by [human] ingenuity..."<sup>1</sup> King once said, "I think that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity."<sup>2</sup> And Jesus instructed his followers to love their enemies<sup>3</sup> and turn the other cheek,<sup>4</sup> "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."<sup>5</sup>

Dr. King, as we know, used the principle of nonviolence in his struggle for Civil Rights in racist America. Gandhi used it to end British colonialism in India. And Jesus preached nonviolence in his struggle against Roman tyranny. Among the three, the life of the historic Jesus remains the most uncertain, obscured by 2,000 years of religious myth and dogma, which often seem to have little to do with his authentic teachings, including, especially, those about nonviolence. It would be a different world if all of us, especially those professing to be Christians, took Jesus' teachings about nonviolence as literally as much else that's said about him.

When overshadowed by the mythical Christ of Faith, the revolutionary life of historic Jesus is reduced to little more than a spiritual caricature unconcerned about earthly injustices. Yet, as theologian William Herzog convincingly argues in, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Jesus' emphasis was always political and economic. "If Jesus was a teacher of heavenly truths," Herzog says, "dispensed through literary gems called parables, it is difficult to understand how he could have been executed as a political subversive and crucified between two social bandits."<sup>6</sup> It's difficult to understand because, as Stephen Mitchell points out in his book, *Jesus: What he Really Said and Did*, "The Romans crucified three kinds of offenders: rebellious slaves, habitual criminals and conspirators against Roman rule."<sup>7</sup> Since it seems clear Jesus was neither a slave nor a bandit, he was most likely executed for conspiring against Rome. Herzog concurs:

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, ed., Krishna Kripalani, Continuum Publishing Corp., New York, NY, 1980, p.77.

<sup>2</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, Harper, San Francisco, 1986, p.334.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:44.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 5:39.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 26:52.

<sup>6</sup> Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, Stephen, *Jesus: What He Really Said and Did*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2002, p.103.

If he had been the kind of teacher popularly portrayed in the North American church, a master of the inner life, teaching the importance of spirituality and a private relationship with God, he would have been supported by the Romans as part of their rural pacification program. That was exactly the kind of religion that the Romans wanted peasants to have. Any beliefs that encouraged magic, passivity before fate, and withdrawal from the world of politics and economics into a spiritual or inner realm would have met with official approval.<sup>8</sup>

Like Gandhi and King, Jesus was a nonviolent activist, which is the only reasonable explanation for his execution. Each of them also experienced the injustice of prejudice and racism firsthand; Jesus for being Jewish under Roman dominion, Gandhi for being Indian under British dominion, and King for being black in a society dominated by whites. Shortly after his daughter had been born, King received a phone call in the middle of the night threatening to bomb his home if he didn't leave. He was so terrified, he later admitted he was ready to give up and get out of the Civil Rights movement. Fortunately, he found the courage to continue marching on.

In, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King recounts what happened after his successful boycott of the public transit system in Montgomery. "if you allow [N-word] to go back on the buses and sit in the front seats we're going to burn down fifty houses in one night, including yours,"<sup>9</sup> warned one cryptic letter found in King's own mailbox. The boycott's success had "given way to a reign of terror," he said. "City buses were fired on throughout the city, especially in poorly lighted sections. A teenage girl was beaten by four or five white men as she alighted from a bus. A pregnant Negro woman was shot in the leg. Fearfully, many Negroes and whites refused to ride the buses."<sup>10</sup> Describing his own experience on a bus, King said:

As the white people boarded, many took seats as if nothing were going on. Others looked amazed to see Negroes sitting in front, and some appeared peeved to know that they either had to sit behind Negroes or stand. One elderly man stood up by the conductor, despite the fact there were several vacant seats in the rear. When someone suggested he sit in the back, he responded: "I would rather die and go to hell than sit behind a nigger."<sup>11</sup>

Until age of twelve, Gandhi was allowed to study subjects like history, arithmetic, and geography in his native tongue, but in High School he said "the schoolmaster's business was to drive English into the pupil's head."<sup>12</sup> By his senior year, "Everything had to be learnt in English—geometry, algebra, chemistry, astronomy, history, geography," he said. "The tyranny of English was so great that even Sanskrit or

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<sup>8</sup> Herzog, *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> King, Martin Luther, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1986, 1991, p. 457.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi, *ibid.*, p. 140.

Persian had to be learnt through English, not through the mother tongue.”<sup>13</sup> Had he been able to study in his own language, he said, “my grasp of the subjects would have been easier and clearer.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, “I could not, even if I wished it, interest my father in what I was learning. For though he had ample intelligence, he knew not a word of English. I was fast becoming a stranger in my own home.”<sup>15</sup> Like millions of other Indian students, distanced from family and tradition, Gandhi concluded, “High Schools were schools for cultural conquest by the English.”<sup>16</sup>

Jesus grew up similarly, during a period of Roman occupation, which was particularly harsh toward Jews. His was a society in which the “first” had everything and the “last” had nothing. The rulers, Herzog says, “viewed themselves as the rightful owners of all the lands and assets of the state, which they could confiscate and redistribute as they pleased.”<sup>17</sup> Beneath the ruler was the ruling class, an elite group representing between 1 or 2 percent of the population that used its political position to accumulate greater wealth, “because everything was for sale, including justice, favors, offices, and influence.”<sup>18</sup> Herzog estimates the top 2 percent of the population in Jesus’ day controlled as much as 67 percent of the wealth.

5 to 7 percent of the population were retainers, a group that served the top 1 to 2 percent by collecting payment from peasants. These were made up of priests who upheld the system through religious rhetoric, the military which upheld it by force, and scribes who kept account of what the peasantry owed. Retainers weren’t paid well but used their positions to charge additional fees they kept for themselves. Because peasants had almost no contact with the ruling elite responsible for exploiting them, most their hostility was projected onto the retainer class they did have contact with, which is why they hated tax collectors, whom Jesus embraced, realizing they were also victims of desperation.

With the exception of a small number of peddlers and merchants who provided a few luxury items to the elite, and the artisans who crafted them, most the population, about 70 percent, was made up of peasants. Even if they owned their land, the ruling class took almost everything they produced. The elite considered the peasants, in Herzog’s words, “as little more than animals whose energy was needed to produce the wealth that the land generated.”<sup>19</sup> They were allowed to keep only “the barest minimum needed for subsistence.”<sup>20</sup>

Beneath the peasants were those considered unclean, probably because of the degrading jobs they had to take on. Herzog says they were “either herded into urban

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.141.

<sup>17</sup> Herzog, *ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.61.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.64.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

ghettos or segregated from the population.”<sup>21</sup> Stephen Mitchell makes a strong argument that Jesus belonged to this class, having been born illegitimate. “In the ancient world,” he explains, “both Jewish and Roman, illegitimacy was considered one of the most shameful of human conditions.”<sup>22</sup> The *mamzerim*, as they were called, were considered the “excrement of the community,”<sup>23</sup> Herzog says. Perhaps this is why Jesus associated with outcasts and sinners, and why he defiantly called himself both a “son of Man” and of God, both a human being and a child of God. As a mamzer, Jesus would only have been allowed to work a degrading job, which is one of the reports about him. “Aristocrats,” Herzog says, “viewed all manual labor as degrading, and they considered those who engaged in it as inferior creatures, little better than slaves. As a result, artisans lived on the edge of destitution.”<sup>24</sup>

At the very bottom of society, accounting for 5 to 10 percent of the population, though sometimes as high as 15 percent,<sup>25</sup> were the expendables, a homeless, jobless class, who spent most of their time begging in the streets or hiring out as day laborers. “The expendables,” Herzog says, “were largely composed of the excess children of peasant households who could afford to pass their inheritance to only one child, usually the eldest son; the holdings of these peasants were too small to support more children.”<sup>26</sup> Upon falling into this class, one’s life expectancy became no more than another seven years, and the peasantry, artisans, merchants and outcasts always teetered on the verge of becoming expendables.

The expendables in ancient Rome were called *untouchables* in India, because they were literally considered too unclean to come into physical contact with. Gandhi once said, “I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.”<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther King, who greatly admired Gandhi, kept a portrait of him above the dining room table, and visited India after Gandhi’s death, said, “Gandhi not only spoke against the caste system but he acted against it. He took ‘untouchables’ by the hand and led them into the temples from which they had been excluded.”<sup>28</sup> This is not unlike Jesus who was often criticized for associating with social outcasts. “To equal that,” King said, “President Eisenhower would [have to] take a Negro child by the hand and lead her into Central High School in Little Rock.”<sup>29</sup> Later in life Gandhi renamed the untouchables *Harijans*, which means “children of God,” just as Jesus, a mamzer, called himself both a son of God and a son of Man, in defiance of the prejudices against him and those like him.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, Stephen, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 1991, p.24.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.25.

<sup>24</sup> Herzog, *ibid.*, p.63.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.88.

<sup>27</sup> Gandhi, *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>28</sup> King, *ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>29</sup> King, *ibid.*, p.28.

Gandhi and King certainly sacrificed a lot, including their own lives to accomplish reform. But one difference between the three may be the extent to which Jesus went to avoid participating in the economic inequality of his day. Gandhi may have come close, having given up all but the six spinning wheels, a few prison dishes, a can of goat's milk, and half a dozen homespun loincloths he owned upon his death. "Love and exclusive possession can never go together,"<sup>30</sup> he said. Ideally, he believed one can only "exercise perfect love" by becoming "completely dispossessed."<sup>31</sup> Since nobody is perfect, however, Gandhi was willing to settle for having no more than one needs. "God never stores for the morrow," he said. "He never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment."<sup>32</sup> This is why, in addition to considering poverty the worst form of violence, he also said, "If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I thief if from somebody else."<sup>33</sup> That's pretty strict, which was both a problem and strength for the Great Soul. Practically speaking, today it would mean none of us would own refrigerators or pantries, let alone have bank accounts and retirement funds.

At least Gandhi lived in a commune where they grew food and he had a roof over his head. But Jesus tried to live with absolutely nothing, not because he thought it was a crime to have possessions, but because he believed in the abundance all around him. He didn't think, as Gandhi did, that God made only enough for the moment, but that there's always so much of everything we need, nobody should ever have to worry about anything:

I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them... Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.<sup>34</sup>

Putting his money, or lack thereof, where his mouth was, homeless Jesus said "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."<sup>35</sup> He told his itinerant followers, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic."<sup>36</sup>

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... You cannot serve God and wealth... Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gandhi., *ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See Luke 12:13-34.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 8:18, see also Luke 9:58.

<sup>36</sup> Luke 9:3, see also Luke 10:4 and Mark 6:8.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 12:13-33, see also Matthew

Gandhi's philosophy of dispossession was based on a mindset of scarcity, that we must use our resources sparingly, not hoarding more than we need right now, or there won't be enough for everyone. But Jesus had an abundance mindset, that there's no need to take more than we need right now, more than our daily bread, because there's always more than enough for everyone. That's the miracle of the fish and loaves, there's always plenty for everyone. I especially appreciate Jesus' response when asked if it was ethical to pay taxes to the oppressive Roman government. Everyone remembers him saying, "Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."<sup>38</sup> But before that he says, "Bring me a coin." I think that's the real point of the story. He didn't have a single denarius on him and was so unfamiliar with money he had to ask, "Whose image is this?" When told, he said, "Then give it to him." Jesus wanted no part of an unjust economy, not even a penny to his name. So, unlike Gandhi and King, who worked to change the unjust systems they were in, Jesus, who had nothing, including no legal rights as a man, refused to recognize or legitimize the system by participating in it, and encouraged others to do the same.

While I admire historic Jesus' refusal to participate in unjust systems, his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. Although an enduring global religion emerged in his name, his commitment to nonviolent nonparticipation has not endured. Throughout much of history, Christianity has been *the* system, and a violent and oppressive one at that. Only 30 years after his execution, the Jews revolted violently against their Roman oppressors, resulting in their own defeat and the destruction of their temple. His nonviolence didn't take hold among his people, and certainly not among the Romans who eventually adopted it as their official religion.

Jesus failed in his immediate effort to establish a better society, yet he did influence the thinking of the Universalist minister, Adin Ballou, who wrote about his nonviolence in the 1846 book, *Christian Non-Resistance*, which influenced Leo Tolstoy's, *War and Peace* in 1869, which influenced Gandhi, who influenced Dr. King. Gandhi and millions of his followers then used nonviolence to successfully force the British out of India, and Dr. King influenced millions of others to nonviolently bring about the passage of Civil Rights laws.

Maybe his refusal to participate in unjust systems is what Jesus meant by the only violent metaphor attributed to him, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."<sup>39</sup> Maybe sometimes the only way to get us to see the futility and injustice of our social paradigms is going cold turkey, even if it means creating division, even among our friends and family, even if we're crucified in the process. And maybe sometimes it's a better, more effective strategy, to make incremental changes, to keep but reform our current system by ever widening its circle of inclusion, bit by bit.

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<sup>38</sup> Mark 12:17.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 10:34-35

I can't tell you if, which, or when one approach is better than another. That's something each of us my determine for ourselves, hopefully without too much judgement toward those who decide differently. What I can tell you with some confidence is that Gandhi, King and Jesus shared common experiences, common values, and common dreams. They were similar in many ways, and each uniquely different in others. Today, as far as I'm concerned, all of them are among those few individuals who stand out as exemplars of human goodness and the potential in each of one of us. They rose above the pain and prejudice they experienced to become giants in our hearts and histories, not because they conquered and ruled nations, but because they conquered their own hate by transforming their rage into courage, and their suffering into compassion for everyone, friend or foe. In a way, the martyred spirit of each still stands before us, beckoning us forward, summoning us to be our best. "Come, follow me. Come walk with me. Come march with me, and we will change the world."