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Religious Nonviolence: An Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh

By Meghan Campbell

“History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.... we know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed” -Martin Luther King, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

“Under a government that imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison” -Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*

“All violence is injustice. Responding to violence with violence is injustice, not only to the other person but also to oneself”-Thich Nhat Hanh, “Compassion as a Response to Violence.”

“It is not non-violence if we love merely those that love us. It is non-violence only when we love those that hate us. I know how difficult it is to follow this grand law of love. But are not all great and good things difficult to do?” - Mahatma Gandhi, Letter to a friend in *Selections from Gandhi*.

Introduction

In 1849 Henry David Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience*. This work was written in response to a government that supported war with Mexico and slavery. He believed that man's inquiry and action created the government he desired. He said, "Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it."³¹ Thoreau was not above breaking the law to make his point. He felt that if a man paid tax dollars to a government that supported atrocities, that man agreed with those atrocities. For example, if a man disagreed with the war and yet continued to pay taxes, he is funding the very war he disagreed with.³² As Thoreau argues:

If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the state to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible.³³

Thoreau's rebellion was thus distinct: strategic and non-violent resistance.

Thoreau felt that there was a higher moral law, encapsulated within each man's conscience, that should be followed rather than any law set by government. Thoreau did not always advocate for nonviolence, and yet his text would be the inspiration for many nonviolent activists.³⁴ This text was given to Mahatma Gandhi during his first imprisonment in India in the 1920's. Gandhi adapted those ideals and inspired Martin Luther King Jr.. King would call Gandhi his "guiding light" in his nonviolent movement of the 1960's. Thich Nhat Hanh was also inspired by Gandhi's success and adopted his principles in Vietnam in the 1970's. Although *Civil Disobedience* was not a religious text, it found its way into the hands of three emblematic religious men.

Methodology

This paper will look at the role religion played in shaping the individual movements of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh. It will illuminate the influence of the individual's tradition, as well as look at the way the individual interacted with other religious traditions. It will also begin to analyze the process of transmission of these nonviolent ideals from one movement to the

³¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 5.

³² Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 15.

³³ Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 21.

³⁴ Ira Chernus, *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea*, (New York, 2004), p. 54.

next. I will be relying on speeches, letters, interviews, and documentaries that capture the vernacular of each individual. Using their words, I will look for explicit references to their own religious traditions as well as references to other religious traditions and figures. When talking about the history of each man's nonviolent movement, I will be relying on secondary sources. For the format of the paper, I have organized it by individual. In each section, I will first summarize the non-violent movement. Next, I will explore the ways the individual expressed his own religion through their non-violent movement. Then, I will look at the ways each man interacted with other religious traditions and spiritual thinkers in their movement. I will end the paper with an analysis, looking at the similarities and differences between each movement and finally answering the question, "what can be said about religious transmission in the three nonviolent movements?"

Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi's Nonviolent Movement

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in 1869 into a colonized India. India provided Britain many resources, including cheap labor, goods such as silk and gold, and a vast market for exports.³⁵ Although Gandhi had gone to law school in London, he was still treated as less of a human being by his white counterparts who were also serving as legal counsel to Indian Muslim traders in South Africa.³⁶ Gandhi began his movement of nonviolent, civil disobedience in South Africa, where he lived and worked for peace on behalf of Indians there for twenty years. He started and lived in ashrams or places of monastic community and hermitage, began the newspaper *Indian Opinion*, was imprisoned, formed first aid groups to care for the other in wars against Britain, was humiliated for his race, and grew intellectually.³⁷

Gandhi returned to India in 1915, where Britain had ruled for more than a century. In 1930, with Sir Irwin ruling, Gandhi began his non-violent struggle by challenging the tax on salt. He decided he was going to make his own salt and asked millions of Indians to join him. In Gandhi's "salt wars" he walked 240 miles to the sea. As he continued to walk the momentum grew, and 78 marchers became thousands by the end.³⁸ This walk was the catalyst for Gandhi's movement. He came up with more ways to civilly disobey the British government: he asked Indian government officials to quit their jobs and to not to buy imported cloth. Gandhi was

³⁵ Michael J. Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, (Connecticut 2004), p. 49.

³⁶ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*. Edited by Louis Fischer. (New York, 1983), p. 31.

³⁷ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 79.

³⁸ *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York, (California, 1999).

finally arrested when he wrote to Irwin about taking control of the salt mill. After Gandhi's arrest, all of India was mobilized non-violently on his behalf. It culminated when in July, 17,000 resisters filled the jail.³⁹ This prompted Irwin to meet with Gandhi. Irwin agreed to remove repressive laws and ordinances and set all the resisters free. Many people felt that Gandhi compromised, but Gandhi said it "awakened the people to their own power." India became independent 16 years later.⁴⁰

Gandhi's nonviolent movement can be characterized by ahimsa and satyagraha. Ahimsa means "no harm or violence," and satyagraha translates to "holding to truth."⁴¹ Gandhi described nonviolence as a discipline: a coordinating of the mind, body and speech. It is not that a person never feels angry, but there is an "intense mental struggle" for peace.⁴²

Gandhi's Nonviolence and Hinduism

Gandhi's Hinduism was the constant process of self-purification. This purification was necessary in the mental struggle for nonviolence. He called himself an aspirant of Brahmacharya. This meant having complete reign of one's thoughts, senses, and actions. The Bhagavad Gita was his guide for conduct and decision making. In South Africa, he began living by Aparigraha (non-possession) and Samabhava (equability), which encouraged him to take a vow of poverty. Gandhi began to view his relationships, body, and life as possessions that all should be used for service. The Bhagavad Gita also describes the ideal karma yogi. This is a person who has no sensual pleasures, no jealousy or ego, has dedicated themselves to God, who renounces all fruit of action, is unaffected by others' opinions, and is always forgiving. Hinduism was the means of self-purification, in order to commit to the struggle of nonviolent action.⁴³

He called his nonviolent movement an "experiment with Truth." He said, "what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years---is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha" The goal of all of his efforts, including his political efforts, was this Truth.⁴⁴

³⁹ *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York.

⁴⁰ *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York.

⁴¹ *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York.

⁴² Mahatma Gandhi in "My Faith in Nonviolence" in George Hendrick, "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha" in *The New England Quarterly* 29:4, (1956), p. 462.

⁴³ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 3.

Gandhi and Other Faith Traditions

Gandhi was influenced by many writers of different faith traditions during his times of imprisonment. Gandhi first read Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1906. This work heavily influenced him. He said, "you have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay on 'The Duty of Civil Disobedience' scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa."⁴⁵ He was also quoted saying that he recommended the study of Thoreau to all of his friends in the nonviolent movement in India. "Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau's essay 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience' written about eighty years ago."⁴⁶ While in South Africa, Gandhi also read Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Tolstoy was a well-known Christian and even nicknamed the "thirteenth apostle." Tolstoy saw the nation state as the biggest purveyor of violence. He felt the current system encouraged people to worship nationalism and country over God. This book affirmed Gandhi in his nonviolent movement, and he was "overwhelmed" by Tolstoy's writings.⁴⁷ The two even corresponded with letters and Tolstoy encouraged Gandhi in his communal living and nonviolence. When Tolstoy died in 1910, Gandhi's newspaper published an obituary for him that spoke of him reverently.⁴⁸ Gandhi in his writing *Experiments* is quoted saying:

A variety of incidents in my life have conspired to bring me in close contact with people of many creeds and many communities, and my experience with all of them warrants the statement that I have known no distinction between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and colored, Hindus and Indians of other faiths, whether Muslims, Parsis, Christians or Jews.⁴⁹

Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. 's Nonviolent Movement

In the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas ruled that the separate but not equal clause should not apply to public

⁴⁵ Hendrick, "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha," p. 462.

⁴⁶ George Hendrick, "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," p. 463

⁴⁷ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 80.

⁴⁸ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 81.

⁴⁹ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 57.

schools.⁵⁰ This ruling made possible other rulings that would further desegregate America. The same year as *Brown v. Board*, Martin Luther King Jr. became the minister at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.⁵¹

King's nonviolent movement involved the combination of acknowledging outward circumstances and purifying the self. He said in any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps, "(1) Collection of facts to determine whether injustices are alive. (2) Negotiation. (3) Self Purification and (4) Direct Action."⁵² Once it was determined that there was no negotiation available, direct action would be taken. In nonviolent direct action, the group would create crisis or tension so "that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so it can no longer be ignored."⁵³ King felt that this tension would help men rise from the darkness of prejudice and racism to understanding and brotherhood.⁵⁴ While in jail, King spoke about the process of self-purification they took in their actions in Birmingham. They created workshops on nonviolence and practiced scenarios where they repeatedly asked the questions, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?"⁵⁵

King repeated a set of phrases in his many speeches and articles on nonviolence. These phrases are the foundations to his nonviolent movement. First, nonviolence is not a passive movement, it does resist. Second, the point of nonviolence is to win over an enemy, not to humiliate them. Third, a person who wants to be nonviolent must embody agape or unconditional love. Finally, the universe is on the side of justice.⁵⁶

King's Nonviolence and Christianity

King was especially influenced by two Christian theorists: Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr. Walter Rauschenbusch introduced King to the idea of social gospel. This theory saw capitalism as the cause of poverty and conflict. King didn't agree with everything Rauschenbusch theorized, but he did adapt the practice of applying Jesus' teachings to contemporary problems. This theory combined Christianity and social activism. Reinhold Niebuhr's theory

⁵⁰ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 161.

⁵¹ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 163.

⁵² Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 2.

⁵³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 12-13.

acknowledged the evilness of man and debunked the idea of inevitable progress.⁵⁷ King felt that Niebuhr was too pessimistic, and Rauschenbusch too optimistic. Using Hegelian theory, he combined both ideas, creating a theology realistic about human nature and one that could be directly applied to segregation.

King felt his Christian faith justified nonviolence. He was often quoted saying that the universe is on the side of justice. King's universe was governed by an all-loving God who chose to be on the side of truth. King also encouraged his followers to model agape love. It is a type of love that seeks nothing in return, "it is the love of God working in the lives of men."⁵⁸ King also relied on many examples from his Christian faith to rationalize his non-violent movement. In his letter from a Birmingham jail, King cites several instances in Christianity where direct nonviolent action was used. King believed that the beginning of civil disobedience was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they refused to obey the laws of King Nebuchadnezzar. This story demonstrated people following God's higher laws, versus government laws.⁵⁹ He also cited Jesus' crucifixion as a violent act, but one that came from Jesus' nonviolent movement. In response to being called an extremist, he says Jesus was an extremist for love, Amos an extremist for justice, and Paul an extremist for the gospel.⁶⁰

King and Other Faith Traditions

King first heard of Gandhi's nonviolent movement while at Crozer Seminary. After hearing a talk given by Mordechai Johnson who had just returned from India, King went and purchased many of Gandhi's writings.⁶¹ King said, "It was in this Gandhian emphasis of love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking."⁶² He would later visit India as a "pilgrim," crediting Christ for awakening his spirit and Gandhi for giving him the means to act.⁶³ Gandhi inspired King in the way of nonviolence, and King would continue to study and quote him throughout the entirety of the movement. King also revered Gandhi, in one article referring to him as a saint.⁶⁴

Similar to Gandhi, King also read those of different faith and spiritual traditions while in jail. These writings affirmed and influenced his nonviolent

⁵⁷ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, pp. 177-178.

⁵⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, (San Francisco, 1986), pp. 8-9.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, pp. 12-13.

⁶¹ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 179.

⁶² Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 184.

⁶³ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 184

⁶⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, p. 17.

movement. King felt that there was a difference between a just law and an unjust law, an idea that has roots in Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. King read this book during his time at Morehouse College.⁶⁵ Just laws are those that uplift the human spirit and personality, while unjust laws degrade the person. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* King uses Jewish philosopher Martin Buber who thought that "segregation substitutes an I-it relationship with an I-Thou relationship."⁶⁶ Earlier in this same letter, King later quotes Socrates when he says that created tension can be good. Socrates thought it was helpful to have tension in the mind so that the mind was forced to overcome myths and half-truths.⁶⁷

Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh's Non-Violent Movement

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in Vietnam in 1926 and became a monk at the age of sixteen. During his initial studies he saw the benefit of learning western philosophy, science, and literature, but his school paid no attention to his perspective. He soon left the monastery and lived in an abandoned building, editing Buddhist publications, writing books, and drawing the plans for the first Vietnamese high school. Nhat Hanh started his school as an alternative to the French system, and with an educational curriculum that was global and holistic. From his success, he was later invited to start the Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon. In 1961 he traveled to the United States to study Comparative Religion at Princeton and Columbia.⁶⁸ When the Civil War started in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh spoke out against it in a series of talks touring the country. It was during this time in 1966 where he met many people who would become close friends and influential thinkers. These friendships included Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thomas Merton, a prominent Christian monk. After this tour he was exiled for 39 years from his home in Vietnam.⁶⁹

Thich Nhat Hanh's nonviolent movement begins with the self. He says, "the purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly."⁷⁰ Once someone is able to return to themselves, they are in right communion with reality. A person must develop right perception before helping

⁶⁵ Nojeim, *Gandhi and King the Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, p. 173.

⁶⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Interview, "Oprah Talks to Thich Nhat Hanh," YouTube video published in part on May 12, 2013.

⁶⁹ Interview, "Oprah Talks to Thich Nhat Hanh," YouTube video published in part on May 12, 2013.

⁷⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, "Communities of Resistance: A Conversation" in *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace*. Edited by Howard Zinn. (Boston, 2002), p. 141

others. Nhat Hanh believed this practice was “looking deeply.”⁷¹ This meant that a person must constantly bring intention into each interaction, and they must consistently refer back to this practice. Nhat Hanh also believed that nonviolence was never absolute. In an interview with Catherine Ingram, Thich Nhat Hanh said, “nonviolence is a direction, not a separating line.”⁷² He felt that it was human tendency to separate the nonviolent from the violent, but in doing so a person created perceived extremes and perceived sides. It becomes us versus them. Because nonviolence can never perfectly be achieved, it is something to set an intention towards not take sides on. Nhat Hanh parallels Gandhi in this sentiment when he says, “why not be a friend of the army in order to help the army commit less violence?”⁷³

Nhat Hanh’s Nonviolence and Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh saw Buddhism as a way to stop the “war within us.”⁷⁴ He felt it was necessary to end the conflict within before we address relationships and community nonviolently. Nonviolence is something that a person must first cultivate, when a person seeks to cultivate compassion and understanding, they cultivate nonviolence. Nhat Hanh’s nonviolence is a part of his religious tradition. Specifically, it is a part of the “Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism” of Thich Nhat Hanh’s order Tiep Hien. Engaged Buddhism is the idea of bringing mindfulness into everyday interactions. By being mindful of every moment, Hanh says that you will notice and be aware of the people around you and what they need. For him, the awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings naturally brings about nonviolence.⁷⁵ In Engaged Buddhism the practitioner does acts of charity and helps others as a Buddhist practice. What makes his precepts unique is that they take Buddhist doctrines and apply them to social situations. He says, “practicing Buddhism does not mean you cut yourself off from society. Real Buddhism brings you into a better relationship with society.”⁷⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh’s Fourteen Precepts directly address nonviolence. One precept says that a person shouldn’t kill and should encourage others not to as well. Another precept says, “do not cut yourself off from suffering people, because that contact nourishes one’s compassion.”⁷⁷

⁷¹ Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists*. (Berkeley, 1990), p. 88.

⁷² Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, p. 87.

⁷³ Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, p. 88.

⁷⁴ Pierre Marchand, “Cultivating the Flower of Nonviolence: An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh” 65:1-2. February 28, 1999.

⁷⁵ Chernus, *American Nonviolence: The History of An Idea*, p. 192.

⁷⁶ Marchand, “Cultivating the Flower of Nonviolence: An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh.”

⁷⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, “Communities of Resistance: A Conversation,” pp. 141-142.

Nhat Hanh and Other Faith Traditions

Thich Nhat Hanh believed the nonviolent principles he was practicing were universal. In the interview “Cultivating the Flower of Nonviolence” he is quoted saying, “Peace begins with myself, and I think that is very Buddhist in essence. That principle, that vision is universal, not only Buddhist, but Christian, Jewish, and also humanist, nonreligious.”⁷⁸

Thich Nhat Hanh’s most well-known relationship was with Martin Luther King Jr. In 1965 Nhat Hanh wrote a letter to King explaining why the monks of Vietnam set themselves on fire. He explained that when a situation like Vietnam is happening, it is difficult to have your voice heard. The monks burned themselves as an act of compassion and love. This act forced the world to see and hear Vietnam’s pain. Nhat Hanh compared this death to Jesus dying on the cross.⁷⁹ In 1966 King and Nhat Hanh met in Chicago. They discussed peace, freedom, and community. After their meeting, King came out strongly against the Vietnam war. Later, Martin Luther King Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. In his letter he said, “I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of this prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam. He is an Apostle of Peace and Nonviolence. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.”⁸⁰ The last time the two met was at Pacem in Paris, France. In this meeting Nhat Hanh told King that people in Vietnam called King a Bodhisattva for what he was doing in the United States.⁸¹ In his letter to King, and in many of his writings Nhat Hanh used Jesus as an example of nonviolence.⁸² Nhat Hanh also had a close relationship with Thomas Merton, a catholic monk who studied Zen Buddhism. The two first met in Kentucky at Trappist Monastery, and after their meeting Merton wrote a letter supporting Thich Nhat Hanh. Merton is quoted saying “Nhat Hanh is more my brother than most of my Catholic monks.” In response to this Thich Nhat Hanh says that “a good Christian manifests the Buddha-nature, and a good Buddhist always manifests the love and compassion of Jesus.”⁸³

⁷⁸ Marchand, “Cultivating the Flower of Nonviolence: An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh.”

⁷⁹ Interview, “Oprah Talks to Thich Nhat Hanh,” YouTube video published in part on May 12, 2013.

⁸⁰ Margaret Mitchell, “Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King” *Charter for Compassion*. (Charter for Compassion 2017). <https://charterforcompassion.org/practicing-peace/thich-nhat-hanh-and-martin-luther-king>.

⁸¹ Interview, “Oprah Talks to Thich Nhat Hanh,” YouTube video published in part on May 12, 2013.

⁸² Thich Nhat Hanh, “Compassion as a Response to Violence,” p. 80.

⁸³ Marchand, “Cultivating the Flower of Nonviolence: An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh.”

Similarities in the Movements

Civil Disobedience

Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh often disobeyed laws in order to follow higher moral laws. We see each man embodying Henry David Thoreau when he said that if an unjust law “requires you to be an agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be the counter friction to stop the machine.”⁸⁴ While Gandhi was in Champaran surveying the local conditions, the government ordered him to leave. He said that by disobeying this order, he was declaring that the British could not order him around in his own country. He chose to follow a higher law: the voice of his conscience.⁸⁵ When Martin Luther King Jr. was explaining the philosophy undergirding the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he explained it was a movement of resistance to the forces of injustice.⁸⁶ Thoreau did not advocate for nonviolence, but a rebellion or revolution against laws and governments who were unjust. It was when civil disobedience was combined with a search for truth that these three movements became nonviolent.

Self-Purification by Means of Faith Tradition

Each man’s movement begins with transformation of the self. Using their respective faith traditions, each activist advocated for internal purification. For Thich Nhat Hanh, he refers to this as healing the war within. Martin Luther King Jr. listed self-purification as the first step in his process of nonviolence as he trained activists in Birmingham. King also spoke that the inner violence of the spirit must be addressed with love.⁸⁷ Gandhi also talked about his movement in this way. He spoke of non-violence as an internal struggle. When giving advice to American black men and women who had visited him, Gandhi said “there is no royal road, except through living the creed in your life.” He continues to say that nonviolence requires multiple lifetimes for its mastery and must be something felt in the heart.⁸⁸ Gandhi called his Autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. All the men also saw their movements as interactions with their religious Truth.

⁸⁴ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 17.

⁸⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 123.

⁸⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 280-281.

Socially Concerned

Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh saw their movements as a way to change social ethics. Each man's movement resisted what was normative in order to bring social change. To this point, Thich Nhat Hanh created the "Five Wonderful Precepts" for laypeople. In these precepts Nhat Hanh urges people to become aware of suffering caused by the destruction of life, suffering caused by exploitation, suffering caused by sexual misconduct, suffering caused by unmindful speech, and suffering caused by consumption.⁸⁹ These precepts were expanded by Nhat Hanh from the Five Precepts of the Buddhist lay person. His additions accommodate for a globally engaged world. The purpose of King's movement was to create tension within society, so that the community was forced to respond. He saw that racism and segregation were considered normative parts of life, and as a result there was a chronic numbness to injustice. King sought to change the social order of the United States by nonviolent protest.⁹⁰ Gandhi operated with a similar agenda. When Gandhi encouraged Indians to make their own salt, instead of paying Britain's salt tax and to make their own clothing, it was an attempt to create a self-reliant India. Indians had become so numb to oppression, they continued to cooperate with Britain. By creating an India that was self-sufficient without British influence, it also encouraged them to not hate.⁹¹

Differences in the Movements

There are many differences between the three movements, but the largest differences are circumstantial and religious. Gandhi's civil disobedience in practice was very successful because there were simply more Indians in India than British. He said, "one hundred thousand English men need not frighten three hundred million human beings."⁹² The British depended on the Indian's resignation for oppression. When a majority rose up, there was little the British could do. In Thich Nhat Hanh's movement the circumstances surrounding his idea did not aid in his success. Nhat Hanh was caught between a war of two major world powers who felt that a victory from one side would bring peace. He did not have the power of majority like Gandhi. King's movement was different yet. While Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh were involved in conflicts of two different countries, Martin Luther King Jr. was involved in a conflict of a single divided country. While Gandhi would be able to use arguments for Indian nationalism, King could not. Nhat Hanh also

⁸⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh's "Five Wonderful Precepts" in Sallie B. King's "Transformative Nonviolence: The Social Ethics of George Fox and Thich Nhat Hanh. (1998), p. 12.

⁹⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, p. 4.

⁹¹ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 134.

⁹² Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 137.

didn't have the support of the press in comparison to Gandhi and King. In one instance, he was trying to help Vietnamese refugees sail to Australia and Guam. When the press leaked the information, every refugee was arrested.⁹³

Thich Nhat Hanh and Gandhi practiced religions that are ideologically more open to other traditions. Both men were not tied to a specific definition of truth and are very open to other faith traditions. Specifically, we see this in Hanh's Fourteen Precepts. In Precept One, it says "do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth."⁹⁴ Gandhi also was quoted saying "I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas," "Religions are different roads converging to the same point," and "All religions are more or less true."⁹⁵ Although Martin Luther King Jr. was very influenced by both men, there is no record of such openness. His speeches contain exclusively Christian references.

Conclusion

Can we qualify the movement as successful interfaith dialogue? Did ideas get traded and produce a new idea, embodying religious syncretism? Or, were the relationships of these men the natural products of a religious pluralist society? Each man had many relationships with those of other faith traditions. But, does a close relationship constitute syncretism or pluralism?

Terms

Diana Eck calls pluralism an "energetic engagement of diversity toward a positive end."⁹⁶ The Interfaith Youth Core of Chicago identifies three characteristics in a religiously pluralist society "respect for identities, mutually inspiring relationships, and commitment to the common good."⁹⁷ The goal of religious pluralism is when people of different religious, secular, and spiritual traditions can "bridge differences and find common values to build a shared life together."⁹⁸ While diversity is a reality, pluralism is the goal. Pluralism can occur

⁹³ Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, p. 89-90.

⁹⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism," *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines For Engaged Buddhism*, (California 1993).

⁹⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, p. 185.

⁹⁶ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: The World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. (California, 2001), p. 3.

⁹⁷ Interfaith Youth Core, "Interfaith Cooperation" *Interfaith Youth Core*. <https://www.ifyc.org/interfaith>, About Section.

⁹⁸ Interfaith Youth Core, "Interfaith Cooperation."

through different mediums: the relationships of people, the transmission of thoughts, the interacting of religious institutions.

Interfaith dialogue or cooperation is a way to achieve pluralism. The goal of an interfaith perspective is to bring people of different religious identities together, form attitudes of respect between personal and interpersonal religious identities and gain appreciative knowledge of religious traditions.⁹⁹ The definition of interfaith dialogue we will be using for this paper is from the American Academy of Religions “people of differing faiths communicate important elements of their faith experience to others through story and other forms of mutual exploration and sharing.”¹⁰⁰ In interfaith dialogue, an individual brings the entirety of their religious tradition in conversation with the entirety of another’s religious tradition. This is different from syncretism.

Syncretism is the process in which different ideas interact and as a result a new idea is formed. Gerald van der Leeuw relates it to the process of transposition. In this process the essence of the original idea stays intact but gets reinterpreted by different groups.¹⁰¹ Van der Leeuw argues that every historic religion is not one but several, “of course as being the sum of different forms.”¹⁰² He sees religion as having both a static and dynamic character.

Analysis

Arguments could be made for the existence of all three concepts: syncretism, pluralism, and interfaith cooperation. For example, in the case of syncretism we can look at the transmission of nonviolent ideals from Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. In Gandhi’s nonviolent movement, it was his experiment with Truth. He would use God interchangeably with the word Truth, and also qualified his movement as truth-seeking. When this ideal came to Martin Luther King Jr., it transformed into an experiment with Love. King used the word love interchangeably with God and felt the purpose of his movement was to embody agape love. King contextualized the movement to fit into his framework of Christian theology. In interfaith cooperation, we see all three men interpreting the nonviolent movement through their faith tradition and sharing it. This is evidenced by the numerous friendships each man made throughout his movement. It can also be argued that the nonviolent movement in America was a result of positive

⁹⁹ Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyers, “The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities” *Journal of College and Character* 12:1, (2011), pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ American Academy of Religion, “What U.S. College Graduates Should Understand About Religion.” Draft Version 3.1. (2017).

¹⁰¹ Gerald van der Leeuw, “The Dynamism of Religions. Syncretism. Mission” in *Syncretism in Religion*. Edited by Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen. (New York, 2004), pp. 99-100.

¹⁰² van der Leeuw, “The Dynamism of Religions,” p. 99.

religious pluralism. Because globalization was occurring, and Martin Luther King Jr. was able to see Gandhi's movement as successful, he was able to learn from it, and adopt civil disobedience. Using Diana Eck's definition, the nonviolent movement would be a result of the "engagement of diversity towards a positive end."

We could also argue that religiously, these movements happened separately from one another or that these men were involved in similar political struggles which forged a friendship, but religion was not shared. For Mahatma Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh, it's important to note that they had a much more inclusive faith tradition to begin with. The integration of other faith traditions and worldviews into their own would not be considered necessarily syncretic, but integral to the theology of their current faith tradition. While King showed reverence and respect for Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh's movements, he did not adopt their religious practices. We know that King was inspired by Gandhi's ideology of nonviolence and adapted it specifically. But, when Thich Nhat Hanh was asked how Gandhi influenced him, he answered that it was Gandhi's success more than his nonviolent ideals that encouraged him.¹⁰³

The point of all three of these movements were not religious pluralism or interreligious dialogue. But, out of a necessity for survival these men relied on each other. King wrote in an address to the Fellowship of the Concerned of the Southern Regional Council that there are three ways to respond to oppression. The oppressed can surrender, the oppressed can fight back with violence, or they can respond with nonviolent resistance.¹⁰⁴ These men may have simply been doing what they perceived they could, and what was perceivably most successful.

We do know that the nonviolent ideals of Mahatma Gandhi inspired and affirmed the nonviolent movements of America and Vietnam. I believe this exchange was a product of religious pluralism and was successful because of interreligious dialogue. But each of these movements are also evidence of essential characteristics for human survival. Each man adapted civil disobedience out of necessity. They interpreted their individual religious tradition as demanding an extreme response, but they also foresaw nonviolence as a successful means of survival. In the face of oppression, they could mimic their oppressor, or put on their religious ideals towards a path of peace. These movements were successful because they address an inevitable symbiosis of humanity. When you humiliate or hate the oppressor, you are closing the door for collaboration. When often, the solution relies on the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Another key to survival is how one interprets suffering. Each man interpreted his own suffering through his religious narrative, and so was able to transform it for a positive end.

¹⁰³ Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, p. 44-45.

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